

The thesis of the university dissertation (PhD)

**THE LANGUAGE APTITUDE ASSESSMENT AND LANGUAGE
LEARNING EFFICACY OF YOUNG LEARNERS IN LOW SOCIO-
ECONOMIC STATUS ENVIRONMENTS IN EASTERN HUNGARY**

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The aim of the dissertation and the definition of the topic

Various individual factors - both cognitive and affective - influence foreign language learning, ranging from motivation, anxiety, aptitude and age to intelligence, to mention only a few. Regional and intercultural specifics also affect the matrix of language proficiency. Central Europe, and particularly Hungary, has a specific geopolitical position with a unique history of foreign language education, in which learning languages is a profoundly societal issue. The paper examines the effect of maternal education on the language aptitude of pupils from low socio-economic status backgrounds (SES). The author aims to highlight the significance of the relationship between the educational background of mothers and how it affects pupils' L1 and L2 skills, with correlations explored among scores for aptitude, maternal schooling background and SES values. As part of the research, the characteristics of the classroom environment in low SES are enlisted, and practical conclusions regarding feasible methodological interventions are drawn, and actions recommended.

The effectiveness of foreign language teaching and learning is a profoundly important societal issue in Central Europe, where countries are predominantly monolingual, and have national languages which are very different from English. This is particularly the case in Hungary as Hungarian displays significant linguistic characteristics and it differs not only from neighbouring countries' national tongues, but also from the major global languages. It can be clearly shown that foreign language acquisition is a central national issue in education and is a predicament that needs to be tackled. The term 'predicament' is appropriate because Hungary has performed poorly on Eurobarometer (2018) language surveys, and the results of national competency tests (Nikolov & Vigh, 2012) of foreign language proficiency reveal that its citizens lag behind other European nations when it comes to speaking and learning foreign languages. Terestyén (2000) and Nikolov (2002) refer to transgenerational problems in education which originate from the specific political characteristic of the region which emerged in the second half of the 20th century, where learning Russian was compulsory for decades. However, what has characterised the decades since the end of wide-scale Russian language teaching in the region? The 1990s and the early 2000s saw a boom in interest in Western European languages (English, German, French, Spanish) that drew on enhanced methodology and coursebooks, and these years are often referred to as the golden era (Nikolov, 2009) of foreign language pedagogy. However, this period also signalled the beginning of major societal differences in language learning. Socio-economic status (SES) has been the indicator of effectiveness as well as of failure in foreign language pedagogy, and a symptom of the country's

segregated education ever since. Language aptitude has always been an extremely important value to predict how fast and effectively language learners can acquire foreign languages. The negative meta-linguistical prognosis (I have bad ears for / a bad sense of the language) easily creates a ground for self-misconception for learners, which can lead to prolonged failures in language learning as well as in the development of the learner's attitude, which will always put the blame on the difficulties or the impossibility of acquiring a foreign language. There have been countless studies focusing on the education and learning of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds; however, papers and research analysing foreign language learning among these pupils are scarce.

Our research focuses on the issue of language aptitude among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, while it aims to explore this gap in language learning by examining the characteristics of the foreign language classroom specifics, pupils' language aptitude and the significance of maternal education in low SES regions and backgrounds. The focus of our research is the language learning process of pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds. Socio-economic status (SES) is an integrated part of the Hungarian education system as it defines the school environment, opportunities for further education and job perspectives. Schools at both primary and secondary level are becoming increasingly selective. PISA results have revealed that Hungary has one of the most significant differences in academic achievement among schools, while the differences in academic achievement within schools are insignificant (OECD, 2016). The impact of low SES on academic achievement is amplified by school segregation, which means that the social composition of schools varies to a great degree (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2005).

Low SES, or socio-economic status, is an indispensable term when researching the social aspects of education. Lower levels of SES often bring about emotional, behavioural and attention-related disorders and problems. Adolescents are affected by depression, anxiety and various psychological problems (Newacheck et al., 2003). Ample research points to higher levels of aggression among young people from low SES backgrounds and they suffer from significant levels of discrimination (Molnar et al., 2008). Low SES affects physical health, as well. Finally, the impact on education needs to be mentioned, as well, including significantly worse linguistic skills, and increased truancy and dropout rates (Colhoun et al., 1998; Steptoe and Marmot, 2004; Zhang, 2003).

When SES is discussed, research into the relationship between SES and SES achievement must be considered. Duncan and Seymour (2010) point out that primary students

from lower SES displayed at least a year's delay regarding letter sounds, letter names, word and non-word reading compared to higher SES pupils. This is often referred to as linguistic disadvantage. However, Duncan and Seymour do not provide one specific theory underlining this difference, thus it can also be concluded that delayed literacy development among students from low SES backgrounds may be explained by their disadvantageous educational environments (Stanovich 2000), as well as by inadequate teacher-parent relationships, as discussed above. The importance of communication and cooperation between teachers and families, particularly in low SES environments has been pointed out and SES has also been found to impact foreign language acquisition (Olshtain et al, 1990).

To gain a well-founded overview of the Hungarian context, some of the major difficulties in foreign language teaching in low SES classroom environments need to be mentioned.

- 1) The decreasing number of pupils: most schools in low SES areas claim that due to segregation they constantly face a reduction in the number of pupils (Liskó 2009). This is a crucially important matter as schools receive government funding and teacher appointments based on a certain quota of pupils. Consequently, segregation does not only lead to a decreasing number of pupils, but also creates a lack of teachers
- 2) Increasing numbers of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special learning difficulties: low SES presupposes the fact that there will be many societal, learning and behaviour-related problems. Pupils often have daily difficulties, problems with accommodation, food or even their own schoolwork. These children are often subjected to segregation within the school and their own classes, and they often lack professional support.
- 3) Lack of foreign language teachers: Széll (2015) points out that the added value of pedagogy work plays an important role in low SES environments. Teachers can compensate for various cognitive skills; furthermore, they can intervene in certain areas requiring development.

Hungary is a country where parental education profoundly affects academic achievement. One of the variables in our research is the factor of maternal education: ample research has concluded that maternal education influences children's academic achievement by 20% more than paternal education. (Peter & Mullis, 1997). This has a linguistic impact as the lexical corpus, and the rhymes and stories used and told by mothers influence the native language competencies, and the literacy and cognitive skills of the child. In our research we expect a significant correlation between the language aptitude score and maternal education, as L1

competencies are reflected in overall language aptitude results. The impact of maternal education and low SES can be seen in attention-deficit and attention-related problems. Farah and Hackman (2012) pointed out that less stimulation in disadvantaged background contexts is the result of fewer books, toys and cultural experiences. Lower cognitive stimulation also determines learning competencies; moreover, maternal education influences linguistic disadvantage. Fejes and Józsa (2005) point out that low SES and maternal education can result in financial, emotional and linguistic disadvantages. Oláh Örsi (2005) considers linguistic disadvantage to be a socio-linguistic phenomenon: poorer comprehension, lower academic achievement, and difficulties in reading and writing can all be put down to the influence of low SES and maternal education.

L1 strongly affects second language acquisition and its success. Language interference has been well established in research (Ellis, 1985). Thus, as habits are established within the family, maternal influence is one of the most important factors in this process by a significant degree (Ellis, 1985). As language aptitude is predominantly regarded as a cognitive construct (Dörnyei, 2009; Skehan, 1991), this paper relies on the underpinning theory that there is a strong relationship between language aptitude and maternal education.

Our research investigates overall language aptitude scores among 5th and 6th graders (aged 11-12). How can language aptitude be defined? As an ability or a skill? If it is regarded as an ability then one of the major characteristics of aptitude seems to be that it is innate (Skehan, 1991), which implies the fact that it cannot be profoundly improved. However, an opposing theory claims that it is a relatively stable ability which tends to predict the efficiency and rate of the process of foreign language learning (Ottó & Nikolov, 2003). These latter two researchers also consider aptitude as a fairly stable phenomenon that can be changed but only with great difficulty. Ellis (1985) refers to aptitude as something not easily defined, while Dörnyei (2009) characterises aptitude as cognitive, as opposed to motivation which is a highly affective factor. Language aptitude is predominantly regarded as a cognitive construct (Ellis, 1985; Skehan, 1991). Aptitude research does not lack dichotomies however: the term has often been claimed to be anti-egalitarian, as it presupposes two extreme dimensions of good and bad language learners. Kormos and Sáfár (2008) question the stability of aptitude, as they argue that the definition is profoundly complex and is not without controversial aspects.

The four-dimension model of Carroll's approach to language aptitude has often served as the basis for future testing, and for new models (Wen et al, 2019), and has been the focus of an immense number of studies. Indeed, research into this area dates back as far as the 1920s when

high failure rates among foreign language students necessitated the investigation of linguistic abilities, while even the 1940s and 1950s saw the need to select apt students for both educational and military reasons. As the language aptitude test for young learners applied in our study relies heavily on Carroll's original MLAT test, a brief overview of the original version will be provided here. Carroll's MLAT test sees aptitude as an entity comprised of four independent "specialized" abilities. The components are the following: phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, rote learning ability and inductive language learning ability. Carroll considered these components to be specialised abilities that build up language aptitude. Research has since established that the characteristics of these components tend to be dynamic and can be developed (Carroll, 1962). Although the 1970s and 1980s saw a decreased interest in the research on language aptitude as the original MLAT tasks bore features of rote-learning and comprised grammatical tasks typical of audio-lingual methodology, language aptitude has gained momentum since the beginning of the 21st century, with new models being introduced, which has resulted in language aptitude becoming the focus-point of predicting and establishing difficulties in L1, thus enabling the use of specific FLA profiles.

Much has been written about the importance of L1 and second language acquisition. We have seen Ellis' approach to interference, as this can affect the process of foreign language learning (Ellis, 1985). Contemporary research into language aptitude has been shifting towards an acknowledgement of the tenet that the relationship between L1 and L2 is a matter of complexity (Skehan, 2019). There has been evidence that an implicit interlanguage system is activated when learning L2, which would presuppose the idea that a higher level of L1 implicit knowledge results in higher aptitude scores.

For our research, the implications of maternal education, its effect on L1 skills and on the size of vocabulary, as well as its impact on language aptitude and its effect on foreign language learning, are all crucially important. The Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) provides a framework for our understanding of the relationship between L1, L2 and maternal education, as the LCDH refers to the presupposition that all the problematic issues in L1 linguistic codes (phonological, syntactic, semantic) appear in foreign language learning, and they account for individual differences. Ample research has established the link between SES, age and L1 differences and their impact on foreign language learning (Sparks et al., 2012; Sparks et al., 1998).

Sparks claims that when intelligence and socioeconomic background are controlled for, there will be no significant differences in semantic skills (Sparks et al 2012). Low

socioeconomic backgrounds have often been linked with poorer semantic knowledge. There are studies that claim that L1 vocabulary knowledge reliably predicts semantic proficiency among learners of foreign languages. If L1 plays such a profound role in foreign language learning and aptitude research, we need to acknowledge the inevitable effect of maternal education on both L1 and L2 skills. It is particularly true of low SES environments that children spend most of their time predominantly with their mothers due to disrupted families or quickly changing family patterns. Studies show that maternal education does matter as children learn most of their vocabulary from the songs, poems and stories they hear from them. It has been pointed out that where there has been an intervention in the mother's educational background in the form of further education, training or distance learning, it has clearly also had an impact on the academic achievement of those children in a low SES environment.

Applied Methods

The study of language aptitude was conducted in 2019 in Eastern-Hungary in severely deprived regions, typically low SES schools, as well as in the capital, Budapest, in one disadvantaged school. The control-group was chosen as a highly selective school in a large city, which also serves as the centre for teacher training; furthermore, this school has no disadvantaged pupils at all in grades 5-6. The number of participants was 386 (N=386), most of them aged 11-12. The research was called the Language Aptitude Survey among disadvantaged students in Eastern Hungary (Nyelvérzékkutatás kelet-magyarországi hátrányos helyzetű tanulói környezetben 2019, NYÉK-KMO 2019).

Respectively, the distribution of the students was the following in terms of the number and the proportion of students of low socio-economic status in 2019, annotated in the official school register and supervised by the school-secretary, and follows the Hungarian categories and abbreviations: H= deprived situation, HH= profoundly deprived situation (e.g. extremely low SES added to severe family issues, such as living with foster-parents, or with parents in prison, or orphans taken care of by elder siblings). We used the proportions of low SES pupils officially reported by the schools. It must be noted however, that the actual number of pupils officially living in deprived circumstances must be higher.

The Hungarian version of MLAT for young learners was developed by Csilla Kiss (2004) with the purpose of assessing the English proficiency and language skills of 12-year-old pupils in South-Eastern Hungary. As the test follows the pattern of Carroll's MLAT, it consists of four

parts. The instructions are in Hungarian, and the validity of the INYÉT test is high (Cronbach $\alpha=0,82$).

Task 1: the phonetic coding ability, which is a listening based task. It consists of 15 items, all of them with 4 multiple choice options. The language used is artificial, called Klingot. There are four options, where one has to be identified when hidden among randomly selected words. The major objective of the task is to recognise the phonetic pattern. *Task 2:* grammatical sensitivity, which is in Hungarian, and consists of 10 items, where the pupils have to recognise and identify the same function of one word (e.g. subject, verb, object etc) in a pair of sentences. For example: LONDON is the capital of England. (sentence 1) – The family likes going fishing. (sentence 2). The pupil is expected to opt for the same form of speech and function of the word in capital letters in the second sentence as well (London = family). *Task 3:* inductive logical skill. This exercise also operates with an unknown language, in the Hungarian version of the language aptitude test, it is Swahili. Participants have to realise and understand grammatical rules in a language unknown to them, by applying an inductive way of thinking with the help of a minimalised vocabulary set. The task is grammar-centred, profoundly employing translational skills. For example: dant = hundred, oko = brown, bur = table; then, using this information, students have to match the most appropriate translation to the sentence. *Task 4:* rote-learning, where pupils are expected to memorize 10 words, in Swahili and their Hungarian meanings (e.g. tamba = lion). Students have 3 minutes to examine the first sheet of pairs of words, while they are also instructed to rote-learn the words. This is followed by another unit of 3 minutes, when they can test their knowledge and practise the pairs by writing the Hungarian meaning on the second sheet, where they only have the words in the unknown language (tamba =).

The aim of the study was to investigate what kind of connection can be found between social status and language aptitude in the process of language learning. In our research we discuss the impact maternal education has on language aptitude scores and proficiency; we then expect to conclude what this signifies and what implications it may have in a low SES setting. In our empirical study, we aimed to discover the language learning pattern of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. As far as we know, no similar study focusing on the comparison of low SES and language aptitude has yet been conducted in Hungary. Thus, language aptitude provided the dependent variable during our analysis. To measure this, a deprived situation and a profoundly deprived situation were also differentiated regarding SES (also, those not belonging to these groups were referred to as students not in a deprived

situation) which was one of our main independent variables. Moreover, gender, maternal education and L2 were also independent variables.

Results

Our **first hypothesis** stated that girls have higher scores in each component compared to boys. First, the difference between girls and boys was measured according to our hypothesis, where we supposed that girls perform better in the language aptitude test compared to boys. We could state that our hypothesis is confirmed, as girls have significantly better achievement. Concerning the different dimensions (tasks), the results were similar to our assumption. In phonetic decoding (Task 1) we thought that boys would achieve better results; this was not supported by the results of the t-test as the difference was not significant, although boys have slightly better achievement compared to girls. This was the only dimension where the difference between the two groups was so small. In the other dimensions of language aptitude, girls had better results. Regarding grammatical sensitivity (Task 2), the difference between girls and boys was significant. We must note that this is the only task which has to be completed in the participants' native language. Generally, better language competency is an advantage which will also be investigated later in the study. Concerning inductive logic (Task 3), the difference between the girls' achievement and the boys' results proved to be significant. This notable difference can be explained by the fact that inductive logic is usually more mature and complex among girls at this age. Task 4 (rote-learning, i.e. learning word pairs) measures learning strategies which are based on working memory. The difference was significant in this case too, as girls had significantly better scores compared to boys.

In our **second hypothesis**, we aimed to measure language aptitude according to socio-economic status. To do this, three groups were created, i.e. children in a deprived situation, a profoundly deprived situation and not in a deprived situation. The differences were evaluated. It can be stated that the results of children who are not in a deprived situation indicate a better achievement compared to their peers in deprived or profoundly deprived situations. Concerning phonetic decoding, no difference can be seen, although we must note that this component is the most innate skill, which cannot be related to learning. Also, this task does not measure learning strategies but listening, and it focuses on the determination of the language. However, in grammatical sensitivity, a significant difference can be detected, and this is true for inductive logic and rote-learning, too. Thus, as a conclusion, we can claim that children who are not endangered by a low SES background, accomplish significantly better results than the others, both in the total language aptitude test and in the sub-tasks (Oláh Örsi 2005; Nikolov & Szabó

2011). Based on these data, we can conclude that students with a better SES achieve better, presumably due to their family background and lower level of disadvantage. These students, of course, can differ regarding their dimensions and nature (e.g. economic, family, language). With children in deprived and profoundly deprived situations we found that these backgrounds strongly influence their academic achievement. However, only slight differences could be detected between these two deprived groups which did not indicate significant differences based on the post-hoc t-tests. Thus, we should mention that the most essential factor regarding SES is the disadvantaged status, regardless of its depth.

In our **third hypothesis** we presupposed that a higher maternal educational level correlates with the language aptitude test, as children of mothers with a higher educational level have better achievement (Furcsa 2012). We investigated maternal education. As we have already mentioned, the distribution was relatively balanced. Due to the non-normal distribution of the data, Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed. The total language aptitude is strongly influenced by maternal education. As had been supposed, the best achievement was found among those children whose mothers had a higher educational certificate.

Surprisingly, children whose mothers had completed a secondary technical school had better achievement in more dimensions than children whose mothers had a high school certificate (A-level exam). We suppose that socio-cultural differences lie behind this result as these parents are usually blue-collar workers. Thus, it can be imagined that work and learning are more present in the life of these families. However, in this study, this hypothesis cannot be supported. The worst achievement could be seen among those children whose mothers had only completed primary school. Thus, we could conclude that the result of the language aptitude test is strongly affected by maternal education. We must also note that the results of children whose mothers had an A-level exam and those whose mothers had a secondary technical qualification are quite similar. This can be explained by the fact that an A-level exam has no value in country areas, especially in the disadvantaged regions.

Our **fourth hypothesis** concerns the results at the national competence test. We presupposed that the competence result will be lower than the national average. We examined and compared the institutions' results with the regional and national average in 2018. We could conclude that in all three fields of competence the schools' results were lower than the national average. Thus, our fourth hypothesis was justified.

Our **fifth hypothesis** claims that the language proficiency test positively correlates with the language aptitude score and the school grade. We expected a positive correlation in all cases, as each component of the language aptitude test can be related to the relative tasks of the language proficiency test. Our hypothesis proved to be right, since our results revealed that all four tasks of the aptitude test predict the performance on the language proficiency test.

The **sixth hypothesis** states that sex, social background and class impacts significantly on the language performance and proficiency of the pupils. Based on these categories, we can conclude that girls from high socio-economic status backgrounds, and from grade 6, achieve the highest score.

The **seventh hypothesis** claims that various clusters of students can be established along the aptitude score and the language proficiency results. We looked into patterns that effectively characterise the language competence-dimensions. Thus, we differentiated three clusters, named “good”, “medium” and “poor”. Our hypothesis was justified. The classes were represented in the clusters with a clear difference: there was an abundance of “good” students in class 6, while the number of “poor” students was low. The difference in sex in the clusters was also prominent: there were a lot more girls in the “good” group, while the number of boys in the “poor” group was low. The effect of the socio-economic status could also be observed: the “good” group had significantly more students from a higher socio-economic status background, while the “poor” group was represented by the majority of pupils from a low socio-economic status background.

In our quantitative study, we investigated the language aptitude of students from deprived social status backgrounds living in disadvantaged regions. We hypothesised a significant difference regarding gender as we supposed that girls have a higher aptitude score than boys. We found that girls performed better in all tasks, but these differences were not significant in all cases, so our hypothesis was partially confirmed. This confirms the results of previous language aptitude research. We must note that this difference is age-specific and can be regarded as an age-specific characteristic; however, several studies claim that this difference decreases or disappears later. One of our most essential hypotheses assumed that a significant difference can be assumed in pupils’ language aptitude based on SES. Our results confirmed this hypothesis, as with significant differences, pupils with a non-disadvantaged status achieved significantly better results in all dimensions. The higher performance of non-disadvantaged students is presumably due to their better family background and lower level of (economic, family and linguistic) disadvantage. Numerous studies have highlighted the negative impact of

a deprived and a profoundly deprived status on academic performance, which has also been demonstrated in the present research. Since the difference between deprived and profoundly deprived groups is not significant, but the achievement of both groups is significantly lower than that of the non-disadvantaged group, it can be assumed that it is not the depth of disadvantage which predicts a lower degree of effectiveness, but its existence.

The impact of maternal education is also significant. As expected, children of mothers with a college/university degree performed best in all tasks, which confirmed our third hypothesis. At the same time, surprisingly, children of mothers with a secondary vocational qualification performed better in more tasks than children of mothers with a high school certificate (A-level exam). We assume that this may be due to a specific socio-cultural difference, as parents with a secondary vocational certificate are often blue-collar workers, so learning and work are much more present in their lives. Based on this, the results of the language aptitude test show a tendency that maternal education has a strong impact on the academic achievement of the pupils. The results of the children of mothers who have a high school certificate and those with a secondary vocational qualification were very similar, which can also be explained by the fact that the school leaving examination has no value in country areas, especially in the disadvantaged regions. Based on the language learned, it can be said that, in general, the difference between English and German learners is small regarding language aptitude. However, English learners performed better in all dimensions. Since the results of the language aptitude test are better among the English-learning pupils in all tasks, we assume that the language choice is realised as a result of a subjective selection by the teachers based on the achievement of the pupils. In addition, there is a fundamental tendency to place children studying in disadvantaged regions, especially those with learning difficulties, in German-learning groups when choosing a foreign language.

Our research also included a qualitative part: we conducted interviews with headmasters and language teachers from the schools that participated in the quantitative research. During our analyses we concluded that the interviewees reported that there was a constantly decreasing number of students, while the number of pupils from low socio-economic status background is increasing. The turnover of the teachers is relatively low, which can be put down to the fact that they are not willing to leave their home environment and their workplace easily, however it is very difficult to substitute any colleagues who leave. Most schools teach English, and some of them offer the option of learning German. It has to be pointed out that choosing one or the other is often decided by the headmaster or the teachers, or at least the parents' decision is influenced

by the school. Many groups learning German include the poorly achieving students or the most problematic pupils.

ICT is present in all schools we have involved in our research; however, the use of smart-boards, laptops and tablets is limited to playing audio and showing funny videos. Concerning methodology, most language teachers showed a well-established command of methods, and they often varied them, yet the most dominant form of teaching is still the formal setting.

In our next step, we would like to extend the research to conduct the survey in a representative sample. Also, we believe that the teachers and directors of schools can provide a more in-depth picture of language teaching; thus, we would like to conduct semi-structured interviews with teachers teaching in schools in disadvantaged regions and their directors, considering the following factors: the decreasing number of children in disadvantaged schools, the low turnover of teachers, the division of classes according to the language learned, the choice of foreign language, the use of ICT in teaching, the teaching methods, and the evaluation in these classes.

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Subject: PhD Publikációs Lista

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian books (1)

1. Szerk. Polonyi, T. É., Abari, K., **Szabó, F.**: Innováció az oktatásban. Oriold és Társai Kft., Budapest, 430 p., 2019. (A pszichológia gyakorlata, ISSN 2630-8207) ISBN: 9786155443947

Hungarian book chapters (3)

2. **Szabó, F.**, Fegyverneki, G.: A mobil eszközök felhasználási lehetőségei a tanítási-tanulási folyamatban.
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The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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