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## POSSIBILITIES OF INTEGRATING FOREIGN/SECOND LANGUAGE CONTENTS INTO DEVELOPMENTAL CURRICULUM AT AN EARLY AGE

**Abstract:** Drawing on contemporary theoretical approaches to early language learning, including the sociocultural theory of development and the communicative approach to language learning, this paper addresses the possibilities of integrating foreign/second language contents into the developmental curriculum at an early age. The main research question is: to what extent do the attitudes of preschool teachers in preschool institutions in Serbia support the integration of foreign/second language contents into the developmental curriculum at an early age, and what implications do these attitudes have for the organisation of in-service teacher training and pedagogical practice? The aim of the research is to examine preschool teachers' attitudes towards early foreign language acquisition, as well as to identify the conditions for its successful implementation in practice. The research tasks include: (1) determining preschool teachers' general attitudes towards early foreign language learning, (2) assessing their readiness to integrate language contents into everyday work, and (3) identifying the needs for in-service training in this area.

The research was conducted using the descriptive method and the survey technique, with a structured questionnaire as the instrument. The sample consisted of 120 preschool teachers from randomly selected preschool institutions in Serbia. The results indicate predominantly positive attitudes of the respondents towards early foreign language learning, as well as their openness to integrating such contents into the developmental curriculum. At the same time, a need was identified for additional in-service training of preschool teachers in this area. It is concluded that the integration of foreign language contents represents a pedagogically justified and feasible direction in the development of the preschool curriculum, provided that adequate institutional support is in place and that the professional competences of preschool teachers are enhanced.

**Keywords:** early foreign language learning, preschool education, curriculum, preschool teachers' attitudes.


### 1. Introduction

This study seeks to examine the possibilities of integration of a foreign language content into a developmental curriculum at an early age in preschool institutions in Serbia.

Even though not an EU member state, positioned in Europe and belonging to its context geographically and culturally, Serbia has put a lot of effort into adopting the currently proclaimed European values and educational policies.

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The lifelong learning approach based on key competencies is now formally anchored in Serbia and has also been embedded into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) level. The current preschool curriculum framework in the Republic of Serbia *Years of Ascent* recognises communication in a foreign language as one of the key competences for lifelong learning in preschool education (Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја, 2019). According to the same document regulating the field of preschool education in Serbia:

“The basis for learning foreign languages is set at the level of preschool education, through development of the mother tongue and by raising awareness and knowledge about different cultures and languages and the role of language in communication among people and cultures. If a second language is introduced at the preschool level, the learning implies situational adoption of the language by ‘interweaving’ the foreign language into situations and activities through which the child becomes acquainted with it and learns to use it meaningfully, rather than through isolated teaching based on specially formulated methodical procedures.” (Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја, 2019, p. 16).

Even though this is the only point where learning foreign languages in the context of formal preschool education is mentioned in the *Years of Ascent*, it opens up the possibility for introducing foreign language content in the real curriculum to be developed in concrete circumstances in a group of young children. Not only the above statement, but also the document as a whole, proclaiming essential care for a child’s well-being and overall development of a child can be seen as a call for exposing young children to a foreign language in kindergarten, not for them to develop competencies, but to acquire knowledge in a foreign language through building a significant semantic foundation and to encounter *the other*, to become aware that he/she lives among different individuals who sometimes speak another language and belong to a different culture. Boiling down the purposeful encounter with a foreign language to developing a competence seems to devalue gaining knowledge that might not be immediately useful but expands one’s mental horizons, triggering a whole range of thinking processes in a young child (guessing the meaning of a foreign word with the help of different stimuli, testing one’s guesses, encoding, decoding, describing, concluding, focusing attention on a detail, categorizing, comparing, contrasting, sorting, classifying, ordering, selecting, figuring out, creating links and associations, paradigmatic relations...) not to mention pleasure, fun, joy and wonder the process of learning a foreign language can evoke in a learner. Although there is no general agreement regarding optimal age to start second language learning (Cummins, 1979) and some longitudinal research suggest that the length of instruction and starting age were not important success factors (Munoz, 2014, according to Pinter, 2017, p. 37), it was found that the key success factors were frequent contact with native speakers (good quality input) and opportunities of immersion, i.e. for intensive exposure (Munoz, 2014, according to Pinter, 2017, p. 37). Concerns used to be expressed regarding the fact that a child has not fully developed mother tongue competence and how the introduction of a second or a foreign language may influence first language acquisition. It has been established that first, second or foreign language do influence one another, but mostly in a positive and encouraging way (Espinosa, 2008, p. 4). The standpoint has been rejected that the mother tongue poses limitations on early foreign language learning leading to confusion or interference. Furthermore, although grammar is not taught at early age, young children can acquire grammatical structures without explicitly thinking about them i.e. they just naturally soak these up from the rich input around them (Pinter, 2017, p. 36). Even if we accept that the emphasis will more often be on guiding the children’s overall development than on the specifics of the new language, which may be no more than an incidental bonus (Reilly & Ward, 1997, p. 2), it seems plausible to investigate the possibilities of integrating foreign/second language contents into early childhood education and care.

Within EU education policy framework, Early Language Learning (ELL) at pre-primary level means systematic awareness raising or exposure to more than one language taking place in an early childhood education and care setting in a pre-primary school context (European Commission, 2011,

p. 6). The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe also recognizes the importance of early language learning and provides resources for curriculum development on its website (<https://www.ecml.at/en/ECML-Programme/Programme-2016-2019/Inspiring-language-learning-in-the-early-years/Principles>). According to the same source, the statement that children get confused if they learn more than one language at the same time is a myth (Schank et al., 2021). The emerging question is who should teach a foreign language in kindergarten. The current prevailing situation in Serbia is that private language schools provide short lessons once or twice a week to children whose parents are willing to pay a monthly fee for them to learn a foreign language (usually English) in kindergarten (Višacki, 2016). In other words, there is no institutional systematic foreign language learning at an early age involving all the children in a non-discriminatory manner. Furthermore, it is disputable how familiar language teachers are with teaching methods appropriate for young learners.

We are not alone in facing the problem of who should be a foreign language teacher at an early age: even the neighbouring countries within the EU still have not decided on the issue. While not yet mandatory in all kindergartens in Croatia, there is a significant trend of participation in FL programs at the pre-primary level (ages 3–6). According to small-scale research (26 subjects) conducted in Osijek, at the preschool level English is taught either several times a week by outsourced staff, usually English language teachers (12) or by kindergarten teachers (14) who lead an integrated program of English language in their kindergartens (Karlak et al., 2022, p. 114). The situation in Slovenia does not differ significantly, having in mind that teachers who teach a FL in kindergarten are still mostly FL specialist teachers who come once or twice a week to give FL lessons. However, it seems that there has been a shift towards providing an intensive in-service teacher training programme for those who wish to gain a formal certificate to teach English to children (preschool and up to 11 years of age). These efforts indicate there is a trend to provide either pre-service (Slovenia) or in-service training (Croatia) to kindergarten teachers who are supposed to open up possibilities for children to learn a foreign language in preschool. And this is not at all surprising: they spend every day with children whose abilities, interests and individual needs they know, and are in a position to expose them to a foreign language every day through child-centered, play-based, meaningful and purposeful activities, providing transparent input and repeated encounter with words in different contexts and bite-size language learning, integrating language learning into daily routines and activities and whatever topic they are exploring with the children. Thus, it seems acceptable to advocate for kindergarten teachers to be those who should teach a foreign language at an early age, striving to create a learning environment strongly resembling second language acquisition underlying the natural approach to language acquisition proposed by Krashen and Terrell (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), which focuses on developing communicative skills through extensive exposure to FL input and engaging activities in an anxiety-free environment. Emphasising that teachers play a key role in the success of any teaching English to young learners' programs, Pinter (Pinter, 2017, p. 51) suggests that English is best taught by a generalist teacher or a class teacher (equivalent to a preschool teacher within ECEC) who ideally has a level of English at CEFR B2 or C1. It is also desirable that the English teachers have access to focused continuous development, and that they are trusted and respected, enjoying at least some degree of freedom. Similarly, although pre-primary staff are not necessarily required to be expert linguists, they should reach at least B2 level competence according to CEFR (European Commission, 2011, p. 18).

In Serbia, preschool teachers are required to have a vocational or academic BA degree and work with children aged from 6 months to 7 years (the final year is mandatory preparatory school program for children aged between 6 and 7), but most preschool teachers are not trained to teach a foreign language. On the other hand, the level of their first FL, which is usually English, is supposed to be at B2 on passing the final secondary school leaving exam and they also have the opportunity to continue learning English language during studies (the length and intensity of courses vary significantly across higher education institutions providing education for future preschool

teachers). Consequently, it would not be too enthusiastic to assume that graduated kindergarten teachers in Serbia have both good pedagogical skills and satisfactory language proficiency (at least B2 level), meeting the above-mentioned recommendations. However, those who are expected to provide 'exposure' to specific languages should understand how language acquisition works and be familiar with second/foreign language teaching skills (European Commission, 2011, p. 18). But a start has to be made somewhere. We choose to examine preschool teachers' views, standpoints, attitudes and their inspiration for integrating foreign language contents into their everyday work with children, in spite of otherwise rather great demands on their profession.

## 2. Methodology

*Research background.* As mentioned before, the study aims to take a closer look at the possibilities of integrating foreign/second language contents into kindergarten developmental curriculum in the Serbian context. The intention was to investigate kindergarten teachers' views on the issue in general, as well as the extent to which they could be empowered to encourage children they regularly work with to learn a foreign language in kindergarten. Given that during their formal education they have learned a foreign language, most frequently English, for at least 9 years and with younger generation students for even 14 years, it is assumed that graduated kindergarten teachers have both good pedagogical skills and also satisfactory language proficiency to teach a foreign language to preschool children. Therefore, our hypotheses were as follows:

H1: Preschool teachers have positive attitudes towards early foreign language learning and think that the current preschool curriculum framework in the Republic of Serbia is in accordance with the possibility of integrating foreign language learning at an early age.

H2: Preschool teachers who estimate their own foreign language mastery as good or excellent agree that they could integrate foreign language content into their everyday work.

H3: Preschool teachers are familiar with the factors significant for foreign language acquisition at an early age but are also aware of the need for in-service training.

*Sample.* The research sample consisted of 120 respondents working in different kindergartens in Serbia. Female preschool teachers strongly dominate the sample (96.7%), which is to be expected given the gender structure of the profession. The largest number of respondents have a bachelor's degree (vocational bachelor 55.0% and academic bachelor 3,3%), while slightly more than one-fifth of the sample hold a master's degree (vocational master 21.7% and academic master 5%). The rest of the respondents have graduated from the former 2-year vocational college (6,7%) or finished a medical secondary school (8,3%).

The majority of respondents work in state preschool institutions (72.5%) and 27,5% work in private preschool institutions. Regarding work experience, the most frequent category is 1 to 10 years (60.8%), followed by 10 to 20 years (23.3%) and those who have more than 20 years of working experience (15.8%). As for the age of children the respondents work with, there is a whole range of age groups: nursery (20.8%), group of younger children (11.7%), middle (10.0%), older (10.0%), preparatory preschool group (29.2%), and mixed group (18.4%).

*Method.* The research was conducted using the descriptive method and the survey technique, with a structured questionnaire as the instrument. The aim of the research is to examine preschool teachers' attitudes towards early foreign language acquisition, as well as to identify the conditions for its successful implementation in practice. The research tasks include: (1) determining preschool teachers' general attitudes towards early foreign language learning, (2) assessing their readiness to integrate language contents into everyday work, and (3) identifying the needs for in-service training in this area.

*Instruments and procedures.* The data were collected in January 2026 using an electronically administered questionnaire, developed by the authors for the purpose of the study. It was created according to a literature review of prevailing methods and beliefs about early foreign/second language learning and teaching (Reilly & Ward, 1997; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Shin & Crandall, 2014; Savić, 2016; Dagarin Fojkar & Skubic, 2017; Pinter, 2017; Prtljaga, 2020; Karlak et al., 2022; Thieme et al., 2022; Prtljaga & Palinkašević, 2023). The technique of a survey with a combined questionnaire integrating open-ended questions with closed-ended ones was used. The questionnaire contained fourteen statements about the acquisition/learning of a second/foreign language at an early age, answered by a respondent using a five-point Likert scale: 5 – strongly agree, 4 – agree, 3 – can't decide, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree.

As for the reliability and internal consistency of the scales, it can be said that the reliability of the foreign language acquisition factors scale is very good ( $\alpha = 0.851$ ), as is the reliability of the support factors scale ( $\alpha = 0.881$ ). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for all Likert items combined is also high ( $\alpha = 0.874$ ).

A section of a questionnaire was dedicated to respondents' estimation of the level of their own foreign language mastery and of their competence to design short foreign language learning situations in line with the topic they were currently working on with the group of children they work with. In other words, they were asked to estimate how well they knew a foreign language and if they thought they could integrate foreign language contents into the project/topic/theme they were dealing with through short situations of learning they designed independently. Furthermore, they were asked to provide the title of the project they had been developing with children and to try and identify 5 to 10 foreign language words they associate with the project topic. They were also asked to identify the kind of support they need in their potential efforts to introduce foreign/second language contents into their everyday work with children, and to what extent. Finally, those who replied that they use AI in their everyday life and work were asked if they think AI could be of assistance in the preparation of foreign language learning situations.

The respondents' cooperation was voluntary, and the questionnaire was anonymous. All data received were used solely for this survey.

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

### 3. Results

The results are presented in the tables and explained in the text below each table.

**Table 1.** Attitudes towards the possibility of integrating a foreign language into the preschool context: descriptive indicators for the statements covered by H1

Item	N	M	SD	Med	Responses 4-5
Foreign language learning is in line with the current curriculum framework	120	3.88	0.95	4.0	90 (75.0%)
Parents are interested in their child learning a foreign language in kindergarten	120	4.02	0.77	4.0	100 (83.3%)
Children show interest in foreign languages	120	3.95	0.82	4.0	94 (78.3%)
A preschool teacher with sound language proficiency can integrate contents into their everyday work	120	3.69	0.95	4.00	78 (65.0%)

The results show that, on average, respondents express a positive attitude towards the integration of a foreign language into the preschool context. The highest mean value was obtained for the assessment of parents' interest ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), followed by the assessment of children's interest ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) and the assessment of alignment with the current curriculum framework ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). The composite score for H1 was  $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ,  $Med = 4.00$ . The Wilcoxon test shows that this score is significantly above the neutral value of 3,  $W = 6208.00$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Regarding the statement that a preschool teacher with sound foreign language proficiency could integrate foreign language contents into the developmental programme, 78 respondents (65.0%) agree or strongly agree. The mean response value is  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $Med = 4.00$ . The Wilcoxon test shows that the distribution of responses is significantly above the neutral point,  $W = 3753.00$ ,  $p < .001$ . It seems that the H1 can be accepted, but it is important to emphasise that there is also a group of undecided or disagreeing respondents, which indicates that the question of preschool teachers' competences remains relevant for planning possible systemic support.

**Table 2.** Self-assessment of foreign language proficiency and readiness to integrate foreign language content into everyday work

Proficiency rating	n	%
I understand a little but do not speak	15	12.5%
Modest	36	30.0%
Solid	56	46.7%
Excellent	13	10.8%

**Table 3.** Readiness to integrate foreign language content into everyday work

Self-assessed proficiency	Can: Yes	%	Can: No	%	Total
Solid/excellent proficiency	54	78.3%	15	21.7%	69
Weak/modest proficiency	22	43.1%	29	56.9%	51

Of the respondents who assess their foreign language proficiency as solid or excellent, 54 out of 69 (78.3%) state that they could integrate foreign language contents into the current project/topic. Among respondents who assess their proficiency as weak or modest, this percentage is lower, i.e. 43.1%. The chi-square test of independence shows a statistically significant association between self-assessed foreign language proficiency and readiness to integrate contents,  $\chi^2(1, N = 120) = 14.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = 0.34$ . Respondents with solid or excellent proficiency have about 4.75 times higher odds of assessing themselves as able to integrate foreign language contents than respondents with weak/modest self-assessed proficiency,  $OR = 4.75$ , 95% CI [2.14, 10.52]. In addition, the Mann-Whitney U test confirms that respondents who state that they can integrate contents have higher self-assessed foreign language proficiency than those who do not,  $U = 2432.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** Identification of foreign words within the relevant semantic field: open-ended responses concerning the topic and key words

Response category	n	% among respondents who answered "Yes"	% in the whole sample
Fully adequate response	53	69.7%	44.2%
Partially adequate response	6	7.9%	5.0%
Inadequate/incomplete response	17	22.4%	14.2%

Note. A fully adequate response is defined as a response that contains the topic/project and at least five relevant foreign words or expressions. Minor spelling errors were not treated as inadequate as long as the semantic link was clear.

Out of a total of 120 respondents, 76 respondents stated that they could integrate foreign language contents into the current project/topic. Among them, 53 respondents (69.7%) provided a fully adequate response containing the topic and at least five relevant foreign words or expressions. The

binomial test shows that the proportion of fully adequate responses among respondents who declared themselves ready to integrate contents is significantly greater than 50%,  $p < .001$ . However, at the level of the whole sample, fully adequate responses were given by 53 out of 120 respondents (44.2%). For this reason,  $H_2$  should be formulated as partially confirmed: it is confirmed within the subgroup of respondents who expressed readiness to integrate contents, but not as a strong finding at the level of the whole sample.

**Table 5.** Assessment of factors significant for foreign language acquisition at an early age

Factor	N	M	SD	Med	Responses 4-5
Age / early introduction of foreign language contents	120	3.36	1.02	3.0	56 (46.7%)
Exposure to the foreign language	120	3.4	0.99	3.0	55 (45.8%)
Frequency of exposure	120	2.99	1.01	3.0	38 (31.7%)
Duration of exposure during the day	120	2.59	1.05	3.0	21 (17.5%)
Comprehensibility of input	120	3.75	1.05	4.0	76 (63.3%)

The composite score for the foreign language acquisition factors is  $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ,  $Med = 3.20$ . The Wilcoxon test shows that this score is statistically significantly above the neutral point,  $W = 3559.00$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, individual items show an uneven pattern. Comprehensibility of input received the highest rating ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), while frequency of exposure ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and especially duration of exposure during the day ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) were rated considerably lower. Accordingly, a conclusion could be made that the respondents are aware of the importance of input comprehensibility, while their view on the frequency of exposure, which is another of the two key success factors, is less favourable.

**Table 6.** Assessment of support factors for the realisation of foreign language learning situations

Support factor	N	M	SD	Med	Responses 4-5
Equipment of the playroom	120	3.86	0.96	4.0	86 (71.7%)
Mentoring support from an English language methodologist	120	3.92	1.02	4.0	87 (72.5%)
Online materials/textbook	120	3.85	1.0	4.0	80 (66.7%)
Ready-made teaching aids	120	3.86	0.98	4.0	83 (69.2%)
Periodical training or seminars	120	4.17	1.02	4.0	95 (79.2%)

The support factors received high ratings. The composite support score is  $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ,  $Med = 4.00$ , and is significantly above the neutral point,  $W = 5796.50$ ,  $p < .001$ . The highest mean value was obtained for periodical training or seminars ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), while high ratings were also given to mentoring support from an English language methodologist, equipment of the playroom, ready-made teaching aids, and available online/textbook materials.

**Table 7.** Use of artificial intelligence and assessment of AI support

Indicator	n	%
Use AI	73	60.8%
Do not use AI	47	39.2%
Believe that AI can be a support	82	68.3%
Do not believe that AI can be a support	38	31.7%

**Table 8.** Assessment of AI as support in creating foreign language learning situations

Use of AI	AI support: Yes	%	AI support: No	%	Total
Use AI	61	83.6%	12	16.4%	73
Do not use AI	21	44.7%	26	55.3%	47

Artificial intelligence is used in personal and professional work by 73 respondents (60.8%), while 82 respondents (68.3%) believe that AI could be a support in creating foreign language learning

situations at an early age. Among respondents who use AI, 83.6% believe that AI can be a support, while among those who do not use AI, this percentage is 44.7%. The chi-square test shows a statistically significant association between the use of AI and the perception of AI as support,  $\chi^2(1, N = 120) = 18.22, p < .001, \phi = 0.39$ . Respondents who use AI have about 6.29 times higher odds of seeing AI as a support, OR = 6.29, 95% CI [2.70, 14.65].

H3 can therefore be considered confirmed: respondents recognise the importance of several factors, with comprehensible input being seen as most significant. They also express the need for in-service training and recognise what kind of support they need in order to be able to teach a foreign language at an early age.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this research provide a relevant insight into the possibilities of integrating foreign/second language contents into the developmental curriculum at an early age in the context of preschool education in Serbia. Starting from the hypotheses formulated, the findings indicate predominantly positive attitudes of preschool teachers towards early foreign language learning, but at the same time also reveal certain structural and competence-related challenges that accompany its implementation in practice.

The results obtained in relation to hypothesis H1 confirm that preschool teachers largely recognise the alignment between the current curriculum and the possibilities for integrating a foreign language, as well as the interest of children and parents in this kind of learning. Such findings are in line with contemporary approaches to early language learning that emphasise the importance of natural, situational, and communicative language acquisition in authentic contexts (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Pinter, 2017; Reilly & Ward, 1997; Shin & Crandall, 2014). In this sense, the results can be interpreted within the theoretical framework of Lev Vygotsky (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 20; Pinter, 2017, p. 10), according to which learning takes place through social interaction and culturally mediated activities (Byram et al., 2002), as well as within the approach to language acquisition that highlights the importance of comprehensible language input and a pressure-free environment (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Positive attitudes of preschool teachers represent an important precondition for the implementation of innovations in educational practice, but in themselves are not sufficient for their realisation.

The findings relating to hypothesis H2 further specify the conditions under which the integration of a foreign language is feasible. Although most respondents believe that a preschool teacher with adequate language proficiency can successfully integrate language contents, the results clearly indicate a statistically significant association between self-assessed language competence and readiness to implement such content. This finding confirms that the subjective sense of competence plays a key role in the professional behaviour of preschool teachers, which is in line with broader theoretical frameworks of professional self-efficacy in education (Bandura, 1977). In other words, although the curriculum provides a normative framework, its realisation depends on the individual capacities of practitioners and on their confidence in their own competencies. The partial confirmation of hypothesis H2 points to a gap between the declarative readiness and the operational capacity of preschool teachers to integrate foreign language contents. Although a significant number of respondents who expressed readiness for integration manage to identify adequate foreign/second language contents (5 to 10 keywords within a semantic field) associated with specific thematic units, this percentage drops when the whole sample is considered. This finding suggests that the integration of a foreign language requires not only general language competence, but also specific methodological knowledge and skills that make it possible to transform contents into pedagogically meaningful activities. The results of the research and the established obstacles indicate that it would be beneficial to include early foreign language teacher training in the education of preschool teachers who are willing to teach foreign languages in

kindergartens in Serbia. Similar findings are offered by the research conducted in Slovenia (Dagarin Fojkar & Skubic, 2017, p. 100).

The results relating to hypothesis H3 further deepen the understanding of this problem. Respondents recognise the importance of key factors of language acquisition, especially the comprehensibility of input, but show an uneven understanding of the role of frequency and duration of exposure to the language. This points to partially internalised theoretical knowledge about the process of language acquisition, which may have implications for the quality of the realisation of activities in practice. At the same time, the high valuation of support factors such as training or seminars, mentoring assistance, teaching aids, and available resources confirms that preschool teachers recognise the need for systemic and continuous support. These findings are in line with the recommendations of international educational policies that emphasise the importance of professional development and institutional support in the implementation of early language learning. Almost 80% of respondents opted for seminars or other forms of professional development as desirable professional support in teaching a foreign language at an early age. This is not surprising, having in mind that a global study of primary English teachers' qualifications, training and career development found that 85 per cent of teachers who work with young learners had undertaken some sort of training course as a form of professional development since qualifying (Emery, 2012, p. 13).

## 5. Conclusion

On the one hand, the conducted research offers inconclusive findings. On the other hand, they do not seem fully discouraging, having in mind that only 12,5% of respondents assess their language competence negatively, while the majority of them think that their knowledge is modest (30%), solid (46,7%) or excellent (10,8). This seems to be a sound foundation to be built upon. Furthermore, they generally have positive views on the possibility of integrating foreign language content into their everyday work. Finally, almost 45% respondents at the level of the sample as a whole provided fully adequate responses and identified 5 to 10 foreign language key words associated with the theme they were at the time working on with the children in their group. It should be borne in mind that the respondents had no prior training (pre-service or in-service) dealing with the issue. This finding implies there is a potential for immediate involvement of a significant number of respondents in foreign language teaching at an early age, to be subsequently followed by systematic institutional support, leading to children having the opportunity to learn a foreign language in kindergartens in Serbia.

A particularly important aspect of the research concerns hypothesis H3, which introduces the dimension of the use of artificial intelligence into the context of preschool education. The results show that the majority of respondents use, or are open to using, artificial intelligence, and that there is a statistically significant association between its use and the perception of its usefulness in preparing learning activities. This finding points to the potential of artificial intelligence as a tool for supporting preschool teachers, especially in the segment of planning and designing learning situations, but at the same time also raises new research questions about the pedagogical justification, the limits, and the modes of its use in work with children of an early age.

Considered as a whole, the scientific contribution of this paper is reflected on several levels. First, the paper provides an empirically grounded insight into the attitudes and perceptions of preschool teachers in Serbia, thereby filling an existing gap in the national research landscape. Further, the research links the normative curriculum framework with the actual capacities and needs of practitioners, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the conditions for the implementation of curriculum innovations. In addition, by identifying key factors such as language competence, professional confidence, and the availability of support, the paper offers concrete guidelines for improving practice and planning in-service training. Finally, by including the

dimension of artificial intelligence, the research opens up a new perspective in the study of contemporary tools in early education, which represents an additional value in the context of accelerated technological change.


Despite the contributions outlined above, it is necessary to point out the limitations of the research. The use of a convenience sample limits the possibility of generalising the findings, while reliance on respondents' self-assessments may be subject to subjective biases. Future research should include more representative samples, as well as more objective measures of preschool teachers' language and methodological competence, including observation of practice and the analysis of specific learning activities. It would also be important to examine the effects of an integrated approach to language learning on the development of children, which would further strengthen the empirical basis for educational decision-making.

In conclusion, the results of this research confirm that the integration of foreign language contents into the developmental curriculum at an early age represents a pedagogically justified and potentially feasible direction for the development of preschool education in Serbia, but that its successful realisation requires systemic support, continuous professional development, and further research into this complex and multidimensional area.

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