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Factors that Influence Attitudes towards Early Foreign Language Learning in Slovenia

Extended summary

The paper presents the research results of the young learners' attitudes towards their first foreign language (FL 1) according to their age and grade. The problem, namely teaching a FL at an early age, has arisen from the following facts: universities in the Republic of Slovenia have been training language teachers for many decades but, in the majority of cases, the courses of teaching methodology were offered by departments of philology or faculties of arts and pedagogy, and were intended for the future teachers from the fifth grade onwards. But ever since the 2003 Bologna school reform and the gradual introduction of FL 1 into the first three-year cycle of the state elementary schools there have been many changes in the attitudes of young foreign language learners towards FL 1 learning. In the Republic of Slovenia, FL 1 is normally taught by specialist teachers from the fourth grade onwards, though they are allowed to teach a FL in the first three grades only after obtaining a special degree in early language learning methodology, and vice versa, generalist teachers are allowed to teach a FL at an early age only after obtaining a degree in early foreign language teaching methodology, which might cause issues in younger learners. That has been the motivation to extend the author's initial 2014-2019 research that targeted the young learners' attitudes towards FL 1 learning in the second grade to the third and fourth grade pupils. A 406-strong sample of the second, third, and fourth grade pupils participated in the quantitative research. The sampling was carried out before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in January through March 2020, which had serious implications on the volume of the sample. Had it not been for the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of all pedagogical institutions, a much larger sample could have been achieved. The research instrument applied was the Attitude/Motivation Test

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Battery (AMTB) questionnaire used in the author's previous research and originally published by Gardner (1985) and adapted for the purposes of a dissertation. The characteristics of the applied research instrument were very good, for the calculated Cronbach Alpha coefficient the value was $\alpha = 0.827$. Moreover, the declared total variance explained is 56.58 % for the first factor, which is a good result. Two research hypotheses were drawn up that aimed at investigating the young foreign language learners' attitudes towards FL 1 learning with regard to their age and their grade. The results showed no statistically significant differences in the T-test with regard to the pupils' gender, whereas the results on the ANOVA and the Bonferroni post-hoc test showed statistically significant correlations with regard to the variable grade, establishing that the attitudes of the fourth-graders and partly third-graders differ significantly from those of the second-graders for most of the items. Oral and project-based assessments start in the second grade, whereas written assessments begin as of the fourth grade onwards, hence one of the reasons for a difference in the attitudes of the third and fourth-graders with regard to the second-graders might be the assessment factor, although it has not been addressed in the paper. Another important thing needs to be highlighted, namely FL teachers who by their basic training would have obtained a degree in general philology that lacks a specific LSP training for early language teaching teach the fourth-grade pupils. The discourse of elementary school class teachers with ESP training might have triggered the formation of different attitudes among students in comparison to general training in philology. Hence, an age- and grade-appropriate teacher training certainly makes all the difference, bearing in mind the different training received by teachers who work in the first three grades of Slovenian state elementary schools.

Keywords: Young learners, ESP, foreign language learning, philology, state elementary school

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