

Pre-Primary Teachers' Beliefs about Early Foreign Language Learning in Slovenia

Mateja Dagarin Fojkar

University of Ljubljana / Slovenia

Abstract:

The introduction of foreign languages into the early years has spurred a need for qualified teachers. Most of the recent studies (e.g. Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011; Mourão & Lourenço, 2015; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016) reveal that there are not enough teachers who would be proficient in a foreign language and at the same time have thorough knowledge of the preschool curriculum and methodology of teaching foreign languages to young learners. More pre-service and in-service teacher training in this area is highly recommended. In Slovenia, there is currently only a two-year in-service teacher-training programme for pre-primary teachers who wish to gain a formal certificate to teach English to children from the ages of 3 to 6 and only a few teachers have finished it. Nevertheless, the research shows that in 2009/2010 almost half of Slovene kindergartens (47,5%) offered some form of foreign language teaching to children and we can assume that this number has grown in the last six years. Ideally, foreign languages would be taught by trained pre-primary teachers, proficient in foreign languages and early language teaching methodology, and therefore we have conducted a research among 369 pre-primary teachers, asking them about their beliefs about early foreign language learning. Questionnaires were administered to all the participants in the study. The results show that most pre-primary teachers have a positive attitude to early foreign language learning. Most of them think that children should start learning a foreign language in kindergarten and that foreign language learning should be integrated into the preschool curriculum. They think that foreign languages should be taught by qualified pre-primary teachers and approximately half of them are willing to train for early FL teaching. Their attitude to early foreign language learning brings an optimistic forecast into the future, but there is still a lot to be done for effective inclusion of foreign languages into pre-primary education.

Keywords: preschool children, pre-primary teachers, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Foreign languages are taught at younger ages across the whole world and it is difficult for researchers to keep up with this widespread phenomenon. The benefits and drawbacks of a younger start are still being investigated. Recent research has thus shown that foreign language (hereinafter: FL) learning can have positive effects on some first language aspects, it increases language awareness and that young FL learners have positive attitudes and motivation towards FL learning (Murphy, 2014; Robinson, Mourão & Joon Kang, 2015). Brumen (2011) similarly noticed that preschool children are intrinsically motivated to learn FLs and are eager to acquire knowledge. One of the drawbacks that has consistently been pointed out is the lack of qualified teachers, who would be proficient in both, foreign language and early FL learning methodology (Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011; Mourão & Lourenço, 2015; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016, Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011).

In Slovenia, early childhood education is organised for children aged one to five. Children start primary education at the age of six. Preschool is optional, nevertheless, 89% of children from age four onwards attend some form of preschool education (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2010). Compulsory FL learning in Slovenia starts at the age of seven (second grade of primary school). Nevertheless, the need for FL instruction before the formal start is so strong that kindergartens often implement FL teaching, hence in 2010 47.5% of all kindergartens offered FL learning, mostly (70%) in the form of an extracurricular activity performed once a week and mostly (70%) taught by teachers of English who generally have a very high degree of FL proficiency but often lack the knowledge of early FL methodology and kindergarten curriculum (ibid.). Pre-primary teachers who would have additional qualifications in FL proficiency would be most appropriate for teaching foreign languages at pre-primary level, however, there is no pre-service training offered to pre-primary teachers who wish to teach foreign languages in Slovenia. There is an in-service course offered to pre-primary and primary teachers who intend to teach English at preschool and primary school level. The course focuses on developing teachers' FL skills and the methodology of teaching FLs to children. Nonetheless, the course is very demanding, it entails 660 contact hours (60 ECTS) spread throughout two years of studies. As a result, there are only a few pre-primary teachers who have finished it.

2. The aim and scope of the study

The main aim of the present study was to research pre-primary teachers' beliefs about early foreign language learning and teaching. In view of the facts that teachers play a crucial role in the quality of early foreign language learning and that there is a severe shortage of pre-primary teachers qualified to teach foreign languages, we wanted to investigate Slovenian pre-primary teachers' attitudes towards language learning in general, early language learning and teaching and their willingness to teach FLs at pre-primary level. Furthermore, our supporting aim of the research was to find out under what conditions pre-primary teachers would be willing to teach FLs and train for FL teaching.

2.1 Study participants

The study included 369 pre-primary teachers working in kindergartens in different regions in Slovenia. The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 61, with the prevailing age between 27 and 36 (16.3%). Most of the pre-primary teachers had been teaching in kindergarten for 5-9 years (20.9%) and, as expected, 99% of teachers in the survey were female. 57.2% of teachers had finished secondary school, 42% of them were college or university educated and 0.8% had a master's degree in pre-primary education. Most of the surveyed pre-primary teachers (96%) did not have any certificates in foreign language proficiency.

2.2 Research instruments and data collection

The study was conducted in the form of questionnaires, administered to pre-primary teachers in kindergartens across Slovenia. The data were collected in April and May 2015. The questionnaires contained 7 attitude scale items, five questions with closed response alternatives and one question with an open response alternative. The internal consistency or reliability of the questionnaires was measured with the Cronbach alpha coefficient (0.78).

3. Study findings

We asked the teachers how much they agreed with the following statements, where 1 means strongly agree, 2 means agree, 3 means neither agree nor disagree, 4 means disagree and 5 means strongly disagree.

Table 1. Pre-primary teachers' attitudes towards (early) foreign language learning and teaching.

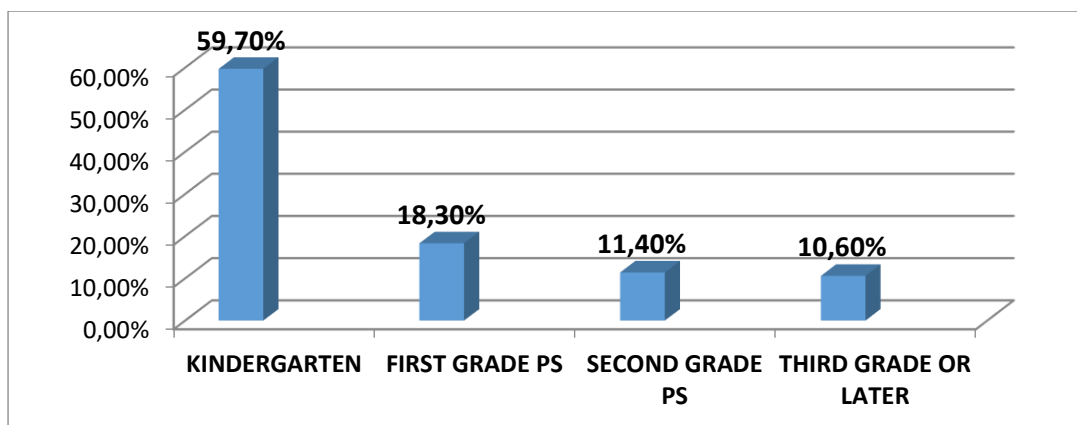
<i>Statement</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
FL knowledge is important in today's society.	369	1.33	,54
Early FL learning has a negative impact on first language acquisition.	369	3.88	,94
Children acquire languages easier than adults do.	369	1.59	,71
FL learning should be free of cost for all children.	369	1.88	,90
Early FL learning makes children interested in languages and develops enthusiasm for their learning.	369	1.98	,80
Early FL learning helps children to learn about other cultures and accept them.	369	2.07	,83
Inappropriate approach in early FL teaching has a negative effect on children's FL learning.	369	2.10	,93

A high level of agreement of the importance of FL knowledge in today's society can be observed from the teachers' responses (1.33). They do not believe that foreign language learning has a negative impact on children's mother tongue acquisition (3.88), which can still be a common misconception among people, who think that starting early may impede children's first language learning. Furthermore, pre-primary teachers believe that children acquire languages easier than adults do (1.59), which might stem from observing children, who do not have inhibitions in using other languages and are not preoccupied with making

mistakes. (See Halliwell 1992 for other characteristics of young language learners). The surveyed teachers would like foreign language learning to be free of cost for all children (1.88), which is, sadly, still not the case. Parents commonly need to pay for their children's FL lessons, which are seen as an upgrade to regular preschool care. Consequently, FL learning at an early age is generally taken by children from higher socio-economic classes, creating inequality at the very beginning of education. Furthermore, teachers believe that early FL learning makes children motivated for FL learning (1.98), which is an important issue, since language learning is a lifelong process and according to Dörnyei (2014), teachers need to generate initial motivation and positive student attitudes toward foreign language learning if we want FL learning to be successful. Similarly, pre-primary teachers agree that by learning other languages, children get to know other cultures and as a result learn to accept them (2.07). Culture is an integral part of FL learning (Brown 2007) and as such should be part of the FL curriculum. Indeed, one of the goals of preschool education, as stated in the Slovenian National Curriculum for Preschool Institutions (1999) is to reinforce opportunities for motivation and joy of learning and to make children aware of other cultures.

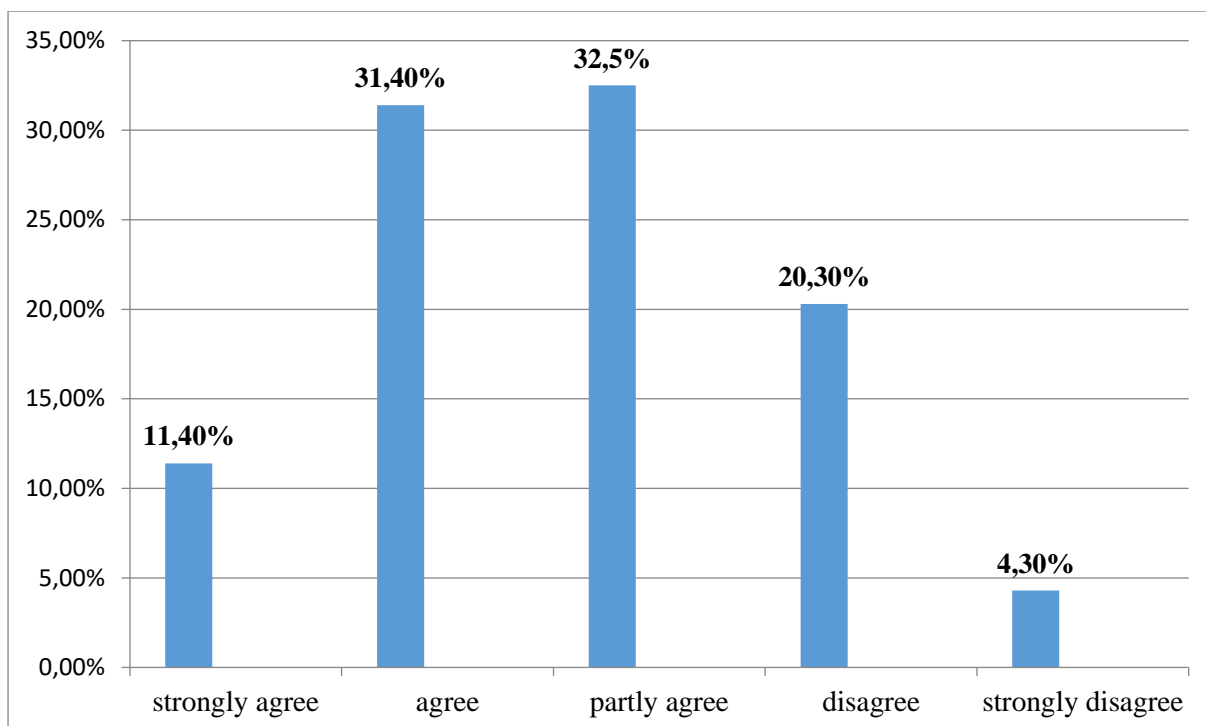
Pre-primary teachers taking part in the survey also believe that an inappropriate approach in early FL teaching has a negative impact on early FL learning (2.10). Many experts agree with this statement (Murphy, 2014; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011 to name just a few) emphasising the important role of the teachers.

Figure 1. When should children start learning a foreign language?



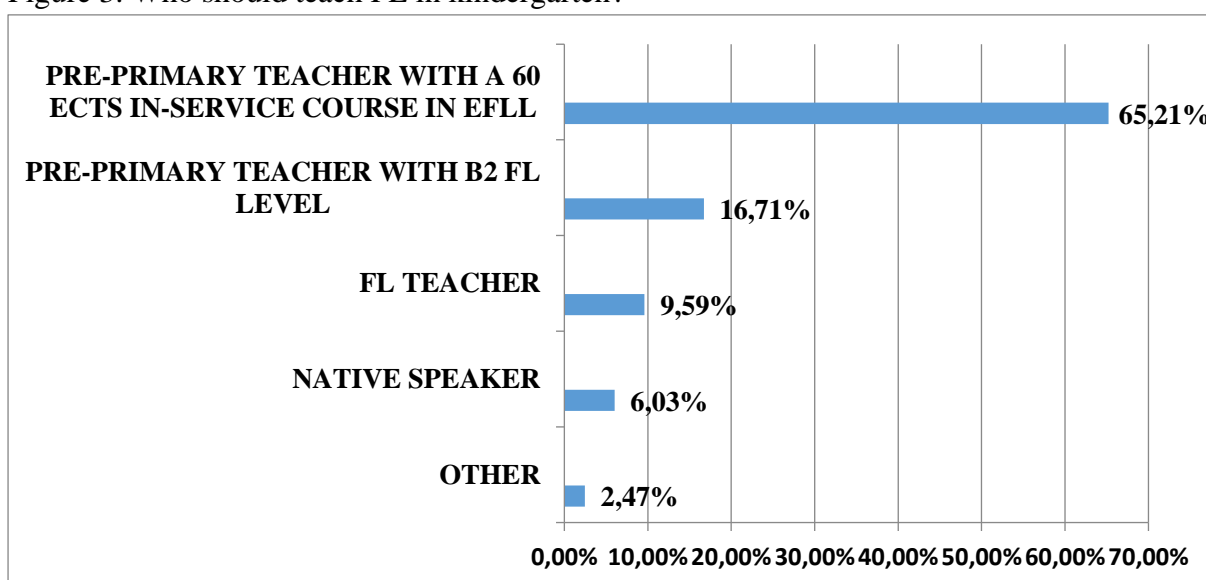
Most of the teachers who took part in the study believe that children should start learning foreign languages in kindergarten (59.70%) and the first grade of primary school (18.30%). These results are surprising, since the last research that was done among parents in Slovenia (n = 1966) showed that most of the parents (36.4%) would like their children to start learning foreign languages in the first grade of the primary school and not before primary school (Pižorn & Vogrinc, 2010). Apparently, the teachers' attitudes to early FL learning are more favourable than those of the parents, who still might have fears about overburdening their children at an early age with additional languages.

Figure 2. Should FL learning be integrated into the kindergarten curriculum?



Pre-primary teachers agree or partly agree that FL learning should be integrated into the curriculum. We can assume that they are aware of the fact that many conditions have to be fulfilled for successful integration of foreign languages into everyday kindergarten activities, qualified teachers being one of the most crucial ones. Currently, 70% of kindergartens which offer FL learning, perform it as an extra-curricular activity, once a week and only 30% of FL learning is integrated into the curriculum (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2010), despite the fact that integration is the most natural way of FL learning at an early stage (Cf. Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010).

Figure 3. Who should teach FL in kindergarten?



The majority of pre-primary teachers selected a pre-primary teacher with the intensive in-service course in early foreign language learning as the most appropriate teacher for teaching FLs in kindergarten. Seemingly, they are aware of the importance of well-qualified teachers, even though there are only a few of them who have finished this course. Merely 9.59% of the

teachers chose FL teachers as the best teachers for teaching languages at preschool level and only 6% of them think that native speakers are most appropriate for teaching FL in kindergarten. These two teacher profiles may have the highest proficiency in language skills but may not have sufficient knowledge of the kindergarten curriculum, characteristics of young language learners and methodology of how to teach languages to children.

Figure 4. Pre-primary teachers' willingness to teach FLs

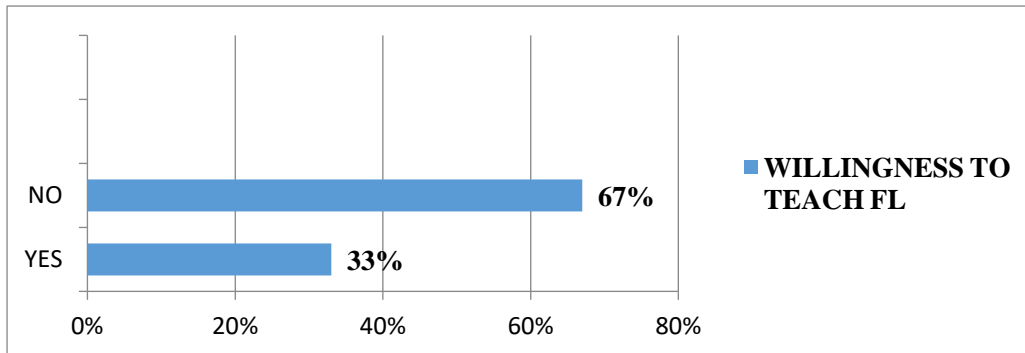
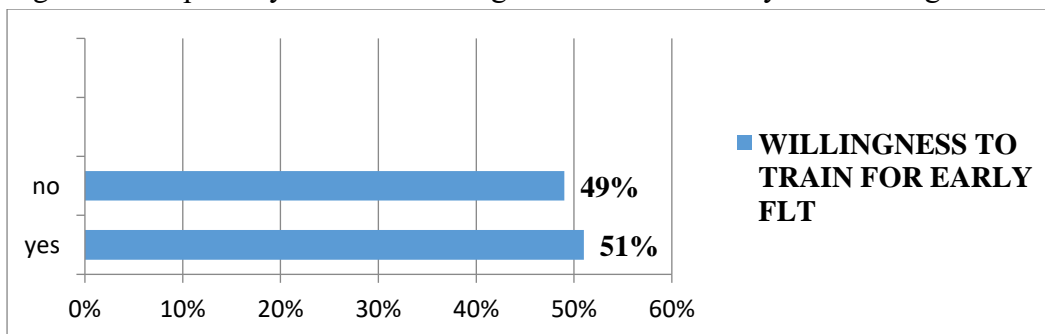


Figure 5. Pre-primary teachers' willingness to train for early FL teaching



Despite the fact that pre-primary teachers perceive themselves as the most appropriate teachers to teach foreign languages at preschool level, most of them are not willing to teach it (67%). However, 51% of them are willing to get additional training to be able to teach foreign languages in kindergarten. A more in-depth analysis showed that preschool teachers who had been teaching for a shorter period of time (less than 13.4 years) are more willing to teach FL in kindergarten and to train for early foreign language teaching (less than 12.9 years).

Table 2. Willingness to teach FL in correlation to the numbers of years working (t-test)

	<i>Willingness to teach FL in kindergarten</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
No. of years working	Yes	121	13.41	10.912	0,992	>0,01
	No	247	19.83	12.415	0,790	

Table 3. Willingness to train for early FL in correlation to the numbers of years working (t-test)

	<i>Willingness to attend a training course for FL teaching in kindergarten</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
No. of years working	Yes	189	12.92	10.825	0,787	>0,01
	No	178	22.76	11.822	0,886	

When the teachers were asked under what conditions they would be willing to get additional training in early foreign language learning, most of them mentioned the support of the kindergarten's principal who should have a positive attitude to early FL learning; should allow teachers to attend the training; if possible, organise the training; not force the teachers to attend such training if they do not wish to do so; and enable teachers to teach FLs upon the conclusion of the training. The surveyed teachers also indicated they would like to have lessons in additional training course in the vicinity of their workplace and preferably immediately after work. One of the issues they addressed was also the training course fee – they want the training course to be free of charge or paid by the kindergarten.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The research conducted among 369 pre-primary teachers in Slovenia shows that pre-primary teachers are aware of the importance of learning other languages and they mostly have positive attitudes to early foreign language learning. They recognise the teacher's crucial role in early language learning. This is important for multiple reasons: pre-primary teachers are teachers, who are most qualified to teach in preschool institutions, they only lack the language proficiency and the methodology knowledge to be able to teach FLs at the preschool level. If more of them were willing to teach FLs or train for early FL teaching, the number of qualified teachers would rise and consequently, the quality level of early foreign language instruction would be enhanced as well. Therefore, we need to develop initiatives to entice more pre-primary teachers to embark upon early FL training, we need to offer them support in how to teach FLs to children and foremost, make early FL training more accessible to pre-primary teachers. Only well-educated and open-minded teachers will be adept at raising multilingual people who will appreciate and cherish other cultures.

References:

- Brumen, M. (2011). "The perception of and motivation for foreign language learning in preschool." *Early Child Development and Care*. 181(6), 717-732.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2014). "Motivation in second language learning." In Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D.M. & Snow M.A. (Eds.). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed.). (pp. 518-531). Boston, MA: National Geographic Learning/Cengage Learning.
- Garton, S., Copland, F., & Burns, A. (2011). *Investigating Global Practices in Teaching English to Young Learners*. London: British Council.
- Halliwell, S. (1992). *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*. London: Longman.
- Marjanovič Umek, L., Fekonja Peklaj, U., Hočevan, A. & Lepičnik Vodopivec, J. (2010). Zasnova predšolske vzgoje v vrtcih [Designing preschool education in kindergarten]. http://pefprints.pef.uni-lj.si/1195/1/bela_knjiga_2011.pdf

- Mourão, S., & Lourenço, M. (2015). (Eds.). *Early Years Second Language Education: International perspectives on theory and practice*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Murphy, V. A. (2014). *Second Language Learning in the Early School Years: Trends and Contexts*. Oxford: OUP.
- Murphy, V.A., & Evangelou M. (2016). (Eds.). *Early Childhood Education in English for Speakers of Other Languages*. London: British Council.
- National Curriculum for Preschool Institutions* (1999). Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and Sport. National Education Institute Slovenia.
- Nikolov, M., & Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2011). "All shades of every colour: an overview of early teaching and learning of foreign languages." *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 95-119.
- Pižorn, K., & Vogrinc, J. (2010). "Stališča staršev do uvajanja tujih jezikov v 1. VIO osnovne šole" ["Parents' attitudes toward implementing FLL in the first three years of primary school"]. In Lipavac Oštir, A. & Jazbec, S. (Eds.). *Pot v večjezičnost – zgodnje učenje tujih jezikov v 1. VIO osnovne šole* [The road to plurilingualism – early foreign language learning in the first three years of primary school] (pp. 90-106). Ljubljana: Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo. <http://www.zrss.si/pdf/vecjezicnost.pdf>
- Robinson, P., Mourão, S., & Joon Kang, N. (2015). *English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: an investigation of their effectiveness*. London: British Council.