

EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: AN EVALUATION OF THE MACEDONIAN EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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Abstract: First language acquisition is a complex biological and social phenomenon involving perceptual abilities (auditory discrimination), motor skills (articulation), cognitive structures (semantics and morphosyntax), and interaction with adults. Classical and contemporary theories—from Chomsky’s biological and innate-language perspective to Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach and Piaget’s interactionist perspective—offer complementary explanations of how and why children begin to develop spoken language. Research has demonstrated that infants’ early perceptual abilities during the first months of life can predict subsequent language outcomes, highlighting the importance of providing a stimulating language environment from the earliest stages of childhood.

In Macedonia, the educational process in public preschool institutions, including kindergartens and early childhood development centers, is implemented in accordance with the Early Learning and Development Program, adopted by the Minister of Labor and Social Policy and implemented since 2014. In the context of rapid technological development, substantial changes in socioeconomic dynamics and communication, as well as advances in scientific research in the fields of early childhood education, developmental psychology, sociology, and related disciplines, there is a growing need to examine the extent to which the specific objectives and expected learning outcomes within the area of *Language, Communication and Literacy Development*, particularly the themes *Communication and Media Culture* and *Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment*, correspond to children’s actual developmental achievements.

The present study examines this correspondence across two developmental age groups, children aged 2–3 and 3–4 years, by cross-referencing the findings obtained from the research sample, which comprised all preschool teachers employed in public kindergartens within the Municipality of Aerodrom -Skopje. The main research hypothesis states that the Early Learning and Development Program for children aged 2–3 and 3–4 provides an adequate foundation for the acquisition and enhancement of early mother-tongue learning.

The main hypothesis was examined through several supporting hypotheses concerning: (1) the alignment between the expected and the actual active vocabulary of children in the respective developmental periods; (2) the relationship between the specific objectives and expected learning outcomes defined for these developmental periods in the Early Learning and Development Program and contemporary scientific knowledge and children’s actual developmental needs; and (3) the availability of relevant instruments for evaluating the implementation and attainment of the objectives established by the Program

The findings indicate that the Early Learning and Development Program represents a relevant and applicable framework for educational practice in preschool settings. However, the results also indicate a need for its systematic revision in order to ensure greater alignment with children’s developmental needs, contemporary social changes, and current scientific knowledge. The conclusions and recommendations arising from the study may be of particular relevance to institutions responsible for developing and revising the Early Learning and Development Program, including the Bureau for Development of Education, the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, and the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as to other institutions involved in educational policy development and the preparation of future preschool education professionals.

Keywords: revision of the Early Learning and Development Program; language, communication and literacy development; children’s active vocabulary; early mother-tongue acquisition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Speech development in early childhood should be understood as a gradual process of language development in which the child simultaneously develops both the phonological and semantic aspects of words, acquires the rules of the language, and develops the ability to engage in functional communication with the surrounding environment (Murdževa-Škarić, 2011). This process does not occur in isolation; rather, it is influenced by the level of cognitive maturation, the biological prerequisites for language functioning, and the nature of the interactions in which the child participates on a daily basis. It might be assumed that children who grow up in a linguistically stimulating environment and who have no developmental difficulties should begin to speak with relative ease, in accordance with the scientifically established stages of speech and language development. However, this process is characterized by numerous challenges and is dependent upon a complex interplay of factors. Indeed, differing interpretations of the relationship among these factors have provided the foundation for the development of several influential theoretical perspectives, among which the approaches of Jean Piaget,

Lev S. Vygotsky, and Noam Chomsky occupy a particularly important place. Piaget examines language within the broader context of intellectual development. According to his constructivist approach, the child actively organizes his or her own experience and, through interaction with the environment, gradually constructs cognitive structures that enable the child to understand and represent objects, events, and relationships. The development of the symbolic function represents a particularly important prerequisite for the emergence and expansion of language use, as it enables the child to use words as representations of objects and experiences that are not immediately present. From this perspective, language development in Piaget's theory is not regarded as an independent developmental trajectory, but rather as a phenomenon closely associated with transformations in the child's thinking (Piaget, 1926).

Vygotsky shifts emphasis from the individual construction of knowledge towards the social nature of language development. For him, language is a culturally mediated tool through which the child establishes relationships with others and subsequently uses it to organize his or her own thinking. Vygotsky particularly emphasizes the significance of communication with adults and more experienced members of the community, as these interactions expose the child to linguistic models, meanings, and ways of using language that are gradually internalized. In *Thought and Language*, he examines the interrelationship between thought and speech and demonstrates that their development is not entirely identical, while at a certain point in development a fundamental interdependence between them is established (Vygotsky, 2012). From this perspective, the quality of the linguistic environment is of immediate importance: conversation, questioning, explanation, storytelling, and joint problem-solving create conditions in which children can expand their linguistic and cognitive capacities.

Chomsky's theory assumes that human beings possess a specific biological predisposition for language acquisition. Within the framework of generative grammar, linguistic competence is conceptualized as a system of knowledge that enables speakers to produce and understand a potentially unlimited number of linguistic utterances, including utterances they have not previously encountered (Chomsky, 1965). The significance of this perspective for early development derives from the proposition that children do not acquire language solely through imitation of adult speech. Rather, children actively identify regularities in the linguistic input to which they are exposed and gradually construct their own system of linguistic knowledge. Consequently, the linguistic environment functions as an essential source of linguistic input, while the capacity to organize and process this input is associated with the internal characteristics of the human language faculty.

If speech and language development is associated with cognitive functioning, social experience, and biological readiness, then the pedagogical environment should provide conditions in which children do not merely listen to speech but actively use language. Conversations with adults, interactive reading, storytelling, symbolic and dramatic play, naming and describing objects and phenomena, asking questions, and encouraging children to formulate utterances independently create opportunities for vocabulary expansion, the development of grammatical structures, and the enhancement of communicative competence (Horvatović-Durčevska-Georgieva, 2026). Therefore, speech development should not be reduced merely to the emergence of the first words or an increase in the number of words used by the child. Rather, it should be understood as a continuous process in which comprehension, language production, thinking, and social communication are interconnected.

In the context of early learning of the mother tongue, these theoretical perspectives substantiate the need for systematic and developmentally appropriate language stimulation (Durčevska-Georgieva-Horvatović, Aleksoska, 2026). Within the *Early Learning and Development Programme* (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2014), which provides the foundation for the organization of educational and pedagogical activities in preschool institutions in Macedonia, three key areas are identified within the domain of language, communication, and literacy development, each accompanied by corresponding standards:

-Communication, through which the child responds appropriately to spoken language, begins to understand language, and demonstrates emerging speech skills in communication with the surrounding environment.

Standards: the child can listen to and understand spoken language; the child can speak and communicate; the child can expand his or her vocabulary and demonstrate progress in the development of correct speech.

-Reading, through which the child's interest in printed materials and recognition of written symbols and letters are developed

Standards: the child demonstrates an interest in printed materials; the child can recognize written symbols and letters.

-Writing, through which the child begins to engage in early writing-related activities, such as scribbling and drawing, which subsequently develop into writing skills through which particular ideas can be expressed.

Standards: the child can participate in activities related to writing; the child can express his or her ideas through written symbols and letters.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The *Early Learning and Development Programme* was adopted and has been implemented in Macedonia since 2014 in public preschool institutions, including kindergartens and Early Childhood Development Centers. This

means that the Programme has been in use for eleven years, providing sufficient grounds to examine the extent to which the individual objectives and expected learning outcomes within the area of *Language, Communication and Literacy Development*, specifically the themes *Communication and Media Culture* and *Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment*, correspond to the actual developmental achievements of children aged 2–3 and 3–4 years. The research focuses on the following aspects: the status of children's active vocabulary in comparison with the vocabulary range anticipated by the Programme; the relationship between the individual objectives and expected learning outcomes specified for the respective developmental periods in the *Early Learning and Development Programme* and contemporary scientific knowledge and children's actual developmental needs; and the availability of relevant instruments for evaluating the implementation and achievement of the objectives established by the *Early Learning and Development Programme*.

Main Hypothesis: The *Early Learning and Development Programme* provides an adequate foundation for the acquisition and advancement of early learning of the mother tongue (Macedonian).

Auxiliary Hypotheses:

A1-Hypothesis

The individual objectives and expected learning outcomes for children aged 2–3 and 3–4 years within the subareas *Communication and Media Culture* and *Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment* of the *Early Learning and Development Programme* are based on contemporary scientific knowledge and correspond to children's actual developmental conditions and needs.

A2-Hypothesis

The vocabulary range specified for children's active vocabulary within the area *Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment* for children aged 2–3 and 3–4 years corresponds to their actual vocabulary development.

B1-Hypothesis

Relevant instruments exist for evaluating the implementation and achievement of the objectives established by the *Early Learning and Development Programme*.

Sample

The research sample comprised 65 preschool teachers from all public kindergartens located within the Municipality of Aerodrom in Skopje. The participants worked with children belonging to the following developmental age groups: children aged 2–3 years; children aged 3–4 years.

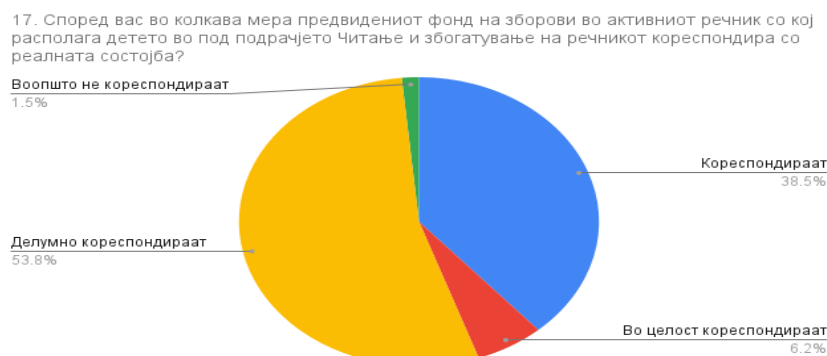
Research Methods, Techniques and Instruments

The study was designed as a descriptive and comparative study, with elements of prognostic research. The research procedures included historical, statistical, and analytical procedures. The following research methods were applied: descriptive method; content analysis of relevant documents; analysis of the relationship between the content of the relevant documents and their implementation in practice. The following procedures, instruments, and techniques were used: a questionnaire administered to preschool teachers; content analysis of legislative and subordinate legal acts and relevant professional documents, including the *Early Learning and Development Programme*, instruments for evaluating children's developmental achievements, the *Child Development Portfolio*, standards, norms and other relevant documentation.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained from the conducted research through a questionnaire consisting of two parts: questions aimed at collecting general demographic and professional information about the respondents, and questions related to the research topic.

Table 1. Distribution of responses to the question: *To what extent does the vocabulary range specified for the child's active vocabulary within the subarea Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment correspond to the actual state of children's vocabulary development?*



Source: Author's research

The results indicate that the majority of respondents (**53.8%**) believe that the vocabulary range specified for children's active vocabulary within the subarea *Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment* **partially corresponds** to the actual vocabulary development of children, while **38.5%** consider that it corresponds to the actual situation. Only **6.2%** of the respondents believe that the prescribed vocabulary range **fully corresponds** to children's actual language abilities. One respondent (**1.5%**) considers that it **does not correspond at all**. These findings indicate that the *Early Learning and Development Programme* remains relevant; however, there is a certain gap between the expected learning outcomes established by the Programme and children's actual language abilities. This finding suggests a need for further consideration and possible adjustment of the prescribed vocabulary range in accordance with children's developmental characteristics and contemporary research findings.

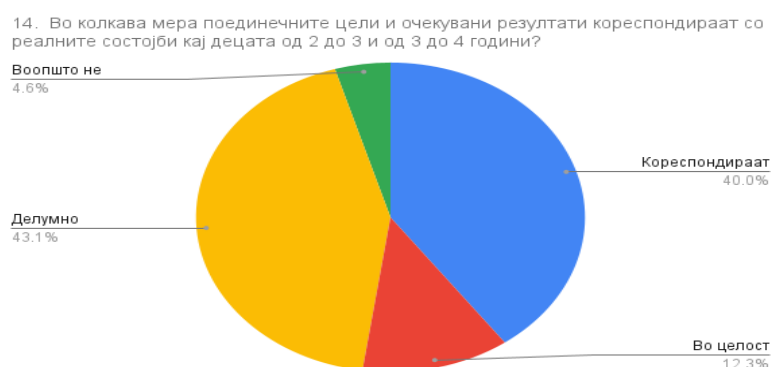
Table 2. Distribution of responses to the question: *To what extent do the individual objectives and expected learning outcomes correspond to the actual developmental status of children aged 2–3 and 3–4 years?*



Source: Author's research

The data show that the majority of respondents (**56.9%**) believe that relevant instruments for evaluating the implementation of the objectives of the *Early Learning and Development Programme* exist, while **33.8%** consider that such instruments exist only partially. A smaller proportion of respondents (**6.2%**) indicated that relevant instruments exist in full, whereas only **3.1%** reported that such instruments are completely absent. These findings suggest that preschool teachers have access to appropriate instruments for evaluating their educational practice; however, there remains a need for their further development and refinement.

Table 3. Distribution of responses to the question: *Do relevant indicators exist in the Child Development Portfolio for assessing the degree of achievement of the standards in the area of Language, Communication and Literacy Development among children aged 2–3 and 3–4 years?*



Source: Author's research

The distribution of responses shows that approximately half of the respondents (**52.3%**) believe that relevant indicators are included in the Child Development Portfolio for assessing the degree of achievement of standards in the language domain. A somewhat smaller proportion (**40.0%**) consider that such indicators are only partially available. A significantly smaller number of respondents (**4.6%**) stated that the relevant indicators are fully available, while only **3.1%** reported that such indicators are not available at all. Overall, these findings indicate

that the existing evaluation framework provides a basis for monitoring children's language development and the achievement of programme standards. Nevertheless, the relatively high proportion of respondents who perceive the available indicators and instruments as only partially adequate points to the need for further development, refinement, and alignment with contemporary approaches to the assessment of early language and literacy development.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Through a critical analysis of the data, an attempt will be made to develop an objective picture of the state of language development among children aged 2–4 years, with particular emphasis on their active vocabulary, as well as on the scientific relevance of the *Early Learning and Development Programme* and the availability of appropriate evaluation instruments, given the Programme's significant role in supporting children's speech and language development.

The majority of respondents (55.4%) believe that the individual objectives and expected learning outcomes for children aged 2–3 and 3–4 years within the language domain, as specified in the *Early Learning and Development Programme*, are based on contemporary scientific knowledge, while 35.4% consider them to be only partially research-based. These findings indicate a positive perception of the scientific foundation of the *Early Learning and Development Programme*, while also suggesting scope for further refinement. Regarding the correspondence between the objectives and expected learning outcomes and children's actual developmental status, 40.0% of respondents indicated that they correspond, while 12.3% considered that they correspond fully. *These findings indicate that preschool teachers perceive the Early Learning and Development Programme as being grounded in contemporary scientific knowledge and aligned with children's actual developmental conditions, thereby supporting the A1 hypothesis.*

Within the *Early Learning and Development Programme*, under the area *Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment*, the section *Expected Learning Outcomes* specifies the following vocabulary ranges that children are expected to have in their active vocabulary: **600–700 words for children aged 2–3 years and 890–1,500 words for children aged 3–4 years**. A substantial proportion of respondents believe that these prescribed vocabulary ranges either partially or fully correspond to children's actual vocabulary development (53.8% partially correspond, 38.5% correspond, and 6.2% correspond fully). *These findings partially support the A3 hypothesis, as a certain gap nevertheless exists between the prescribed expectations and children's actual language abilities, indicating a need for further adjustment and refinement of the specified vocabulary ranges.*

About the availability of relevant instruments for evaluating the implementation and achievement of the objectives of the *Early Learning and Development Programme*, the data indicate that the majority of respondents (63.1%) believe that such instruments exist, while 33.8% consider that they exist only partially. *Overall, 96.9% of respondents believe that relevant instruments for evaluating the implementation and achievement of the objectives of the Early Learning and Development Programme exist. This indicates that preschool teachers have access to appropriate means for evaluating their educational practice, although some perceive the available instruments as only partially relevant. These findings support the B1 hypothesis.*

5. CONCLUSIONS

The interpretation of the research findings showed that the *Early Learning and Development Programme* has provided a relevant and applicable framework for supporting the acquisition and advancement of early learning of the mother tongue and has represented a valuable tool in educational practice. However, its revision is necessary in order to ensure its alignment with the requirements of contemporary society and current scientific knowledge. The interpretation of the research findings highlighted the following recommendations:

-Reconsideration of the standard established in the *Early Learning and Development Programme* concerning the active vocabulary range across different developmental periods. The prescribed vocabulary range should be reviewed and, where appropriate, reduced in accordance with the findings concerning children's actual language development.

-Reorientation of examples of activities and didactic recommendations towards addressing contemporary challenges in early mother-tongue learning, particularly the increasing use of Anglicisms, dialectal forms, and slang.

-Strengthening cooperation between parents and preschool institutions through the organization of diverse educational workshops and other forms of collaborative engagement.

-Provision of additional professional support for preschool teachers through continuing professional development programmes, specialized training, seminars, and contemporary educational and didactic materials.

-Strengthening awareness of the importance of language as an essential component of cultural and personal identity.

-Conducting further research aimed at examining the potential correlation between excessive use of digital devices and speech and language difficulties in early childhood.

-Enhancing the international comparability of language competencies among preschool-aged children, including the development and application of comparable assessment criteria and indicators aligned with contemporary international research and assessment frameworks.

The main conclusions of the study may be presented in a short Conclusions section, which may stand alone or form a subsection of a Discussion or Results and Discussion section. Conclusions should provide a summary of important findings and their implications to the area of research that is the focus of the article.

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