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The Associations between Language-Specific Social and Cultural Capital and Language Exam Acquisition

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Abstract

In Hungary, between 1996 and 2022, a law was in force that ordered to have an at least B2 level foreign language exam to be able to get the degree. The legislation was suspended during the COVID period and abolished in 2022. It is agreed that learning achievement is strongly determined by socio-economic status, but no multidimensional study has yet been carried out on the impact of language-specific social and cultural capital. In the present study, we aim to investigate these close relationship structures among students without a language exam at the end of university years. We hypothesised that language-specific social capital influences attitudes towards language learning and thus the chances of passing the language exam. We conducted a survey among students who graduated from two higher education institutions in the most populous but economically least developed regions of Hungary, but did not obtain a degree due to lack of language proficiency. As a control group, we also interviewed successful language learners who as university students, already had a language examination that met the exit requirements. The full survey was carried out through our online questionnaire sent out on Neptun (Neptun is a unified study system software, which performs the academic and financial administration and educational organisation tasks of Hungarian higher education institutions). Our results show that linguistic social capital in the network of contacts has a significant impact on language proficiency. Informal relationships also have an impact on the effectiveness of foreign language learning, as friends belong to a similar social group to the language learner. The significance of the study of the Hungarian context lies in the unique language examination requirement for higher education, but there are also international lessons to be learned. The cultural and social diversity of learners and students means that language learning cannot be left to families to motivate, create a foreign

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language environment and provide other factors that support language learning, so research on language learning should no longer focus solely on middle-class language learners.

Keywords: lack of language exam, language learning failure, language-specific social and cultural capital.

1. Introduction

In the former Soviet countries of interest the Russian language was compulsory, but as it was forced, it was not a language that the society was keen to learn. The teaching of western languages in schools started later, after the political regime change. Language teachers also had to be replaced. German and English languages were equally attractive for a long time, now English dominates, but there are social and regional differences in the success of language learning.

In the international literature, the lack of language proficiency is explained mainly by psychological factors, a view that is strongly supported by Gardner, MacIntyre and Ling. The dominance of the psychological explanatory model is due to the fact that language learning research focuses on average, middle-class learners. In the international literature, the latter aspect is less frequently examined in recent works (Kahn-Horwitz, Goldenberg and Hackman). The effects of the learner's position in the social structure and his or her cultural and social capital resources have not been taken into account in the study of the career break caused by the lack of language proficiency. The main aim of our research is to investigate the impact of students' socio-economic status and relational resources on language learning careers and language proficiency. We have built the interpretative framework of our study on the main claims of the academic discourse on different aspects of language learning and teaching and on the results of previous research.

Many researchers have already investigated the cognitive characteristics of language learners and their results are almost identical: they have found a strong correlation between language learning success and language abilities, intelligence and language learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2010; Dörnyei et al., 2006; Polonyi, Mérő, 2007; Oxford, 1990). Regarding affective characteristics, research has found that lack of motivation hinders language learning, but also that self-confidence and language anxiety affect language learning outcomes (Dörnyei, 2010; Dörnyei et al., 2006; Kálmán, 2016; Albert, 2004; Piniel, Albert, 2020). However, recent international research has shown that socioeconomic background also influences language learning outcomes through affective and cognitive factors. As parents are the primary stakeholders in their child's academic achievement, they play a huge role in it (Dawadi, 2020). International research has shown the importance of the role of parents in preparing for language examinations, and a clear difference has emerged between children of graduates and children of low-educated parents. The influence of parents on language learning has also been detected in sociolinguistic research (Asli, Dollar, 2017). In addition to theories and research experiences that analyse the language learning process, the influence of sociocultural background is an important factor in our research. Several studies have looked for the relationship between social background variables, academic achievement and language proficiency. These emphasise the importance of parental schooling (Smith et al., 1997; Iwaniec, 2020; Sanjurjo et al., 2017; Rintaningrum et al., 2017). They also point to the potential for reducing dropout rates among disadvantaged students through a positive classroom environment, regular parent-teacher contact and skills-oriented curriculum modification (Shields, 1991; Allington, 1991). Furthermore, several researches also suggests that disadvantage is associated with poorer stimulation, as the level of cultural experience is very low, and thus lower cognitive stimulation results in lower learning competence development (Neville et al., 2013; Farah, Hackman, 2012; Hackman et al., 2010). Research should identify the socio-cultural causes of language learning failure, as well as the factors and pedagogical practices that can override the influence of social background.

2. Research questions, hypotheses

The main questions of our research are: how demographic and socio-economic variables (parental education, economic and residential status) affect the chances of language proficiency, how language-specific social and cultural capital affects language proficiency, and how the type of secondary school and academic achievement affect language learning success.

Hypothesis 1: Social status and cultural capital would predict language acquisition. It is hypothesised that those in less advantaged social situations and with lower cultural capital will

have lower rates of language proficiency (Bartha, 2002; Réthyné, Vámos, 2006; Németh, 1997; Dweck, 2006; Hunter, 2017).

Hypothesis 2: We hypothesise that language-specific cultural and social capital, i.e. parents' language literacy, language education, working abroad, and language skills of friends and best friends, as well as non-English speaking friends/acquaintances, would predict attitudes towards language learning and thus language proficiency.

Hypothesis 3: It is hypothesised that the place of residence and the location of the primary school during childhood influences the probability of having a language exam: the smaller the municipality where a person lived or attended primary school during childhood, the less likely he or she is to have a language exam (Foreign Language Measurement, 2017; Andor, 2000; Terestyéni, 1996).

Hypothesis 4: We hypothesize that childhood residence influences the school career, which affects whether someone has a language exam. We also hypothesise fewer successful language examiners among students who study part-time in higher education and among those who attend fee-paying courses (Fehérvári, 2008; Imre, 2007).

3. Research methods

In our research, we conducted a quantitative survey of students who did not graduate from two universities in Hungary's most populous but economically less developed region, due to lack of language exams. The database, with 560 participants, was named "Non-degree holders without language examination 2019–2021". The population was defined on the basis of the approximately 14,000 diplomas awarded in 2020 without a language exam due to the legislation suspended in the wake of the COVID situation. As a control group, we also interviewed language graduates who, as university students, already had a language exam that met the exit requirements. They were also students from the two universities studied. This control group of 820 participants was named "Successful Language Learners 2021". This group was also reached by a sampling procedure using a questionnaire sent out via the Neptun system. When interpreting the results, we must take into account the limited generalisability due to the non-representative sample. The students without language exam were fully contacted with our online questionnaire. The questionnaire on which our study of successful language examiners is based was completed in 2021 by sending it out via the Neptun system of the two universities. Language major students were not included in the sample for either database query. The basic distributions of the study sample are shown in Table 1 (Appendix). Stepwise binary logistic regression was used as a method of statistical analysis (Table 2, Appendix).

4. Results

According to the analysis gender, age, parental education, type of secondary school, learning outcomes of secondary school, language specialisation, extra lessons in secondary school, restart of language learning, learning more than one language, leisure activities that support language learning, language learning strategies, going abroad, field of higher education, funding of higher education, language skills of best friend of friends, and having a non-Hungarian-speaking foreign friend were significantly ($P < 0.001$) associated with language proficiency. Finally, a multivariate analysis was conducted to see which effects proved to be really strong when controlling for each other. In the logistic regression analysis (Nagelkerke R-Square= 0.589), the following factors significantly ($P < 0.001$) supported obtaining language exam: gender, financial situation, type of settlement, father's language proficiency, type of secondary school, language specialisation, extracurricular language lessons in secondary school, restarting language learning, and leisure activities that supported language learning (Table 2). The observed effects given by Nagelkerke R-Square are strong.

From the logistic regression analysis of the gender variable, it can be seen that men are the most likely to be unsuccessful in language learning. Among those with a language proficiency test, having children is not common (12.6 %), but those without a language proficiency test are over-represented among those with one child (9.9 %). There were also significant results for employment: those without a language exam were over-represented among those who worked full-time during their studies (32.6 %). Our logistic regression analysis showed that those with a language exam had significantly more, while those without a language exam had more modest financial assets. Both parents of students with language exams have significantly higher educational attainment than those without ($P < 0.001$). The logistic regression analysis also

revealed that high parental status and the parent's (especially the father's) knowledge of a foreign language have an effect on language knowledge. The father's language proficiency has an effect on the chance of acquiring a language exam according to the logistic regression analysis, and language-specific social capital also has a positive effect on the probability of passing a language exam. Respondents with higher language-specific social capital are the children of fathers with higher education and higher cultural capital. The effect of language-specific social capital is clearly positive on language proficiency. Regarding the language skills of friends, it was found that both best friends and friends are over-represented among friends of language proficiency test takers with intermediate or advanced language skills (intermediate: 50.9 %, advanced: 27.5 %), while those without language exams are more likely to have no (23 %) or basic (35.1 %) language skills. Foreign friends and acquaintances are also over-represented among those who have taken the language exam (37.8 %). Not surprisingly, friends who have good academic performance and are successful language examiners are also associated with the socio-economic background of the individual. Furthermore, we also pointed out that small towns are more likely to have successful language learners, with an over-representation of small town residents among language exam takers (37.4 %).

Language proficiency is also influenced by the type of secondary school and the academic performance according to our regression analysis. Students attending secondary grammar school and those with an academic performance of 4.00-5.00 in secondary school are more likely to have passed the language exam. 72.1 % of those with a language exam attended secondary grammar school and 72.1 % had an academic performance of 4.00-5.00. Those who did not have a language exam were over-represented among those who attended secondary technical school (46 %) and those with a lower academic performance (3.00-4.00) (48 %), as well as those who had deferred a year of higher education for reasons of course failure or other reasons. Furthermore, we pointed out that the proportion of language learners who had 6-8 language classes per week is very high those who have a language exam, almost 40 %. As regards the financing of higher education, those who had passed the language exam tended to attend a course financed by the state (73.3 %), while those without a language exam tended to attend a self-cost course. Finally, an analysis of the relationship between the type of funding and the field of study reveals that law (19.3 %), engineering (17.2 %) and humanities (20.2 %) are over-represented in the publicly funded fields of study among language graduates, while the same fields are over-represented among self-cost students with no language examination (law: 21.4 %, engineering: 17.4 %, humanities: 17.4 %).

In general, both those with and without a language exam consider language learning to be important, but there is a significant difference between the two groups. On a scale of 1 to 4, those without a language exam rated the importance of language learning as 3.33, while those with a language exam rated it significantly higher, at 3.74. Since successful language exam takers are mainly the children of more highly educated and language-speaking parents, the importance of language skills is higher among them. Thus, the effect of parental education is reflected in this case, too.

So, in the region studied, a student is more likely no to pass the language exam until the end of university years if he/she is male, if he/she comes from a disadvantaged family, if his/her childhood residence is a big town/city, if his/her father does not have foreign language skills. Furthermore, students are more likely to be unable to pass a language test if they attended a vocational secondary school, if they did not attend a language specialisation class, if they attended fewer extra lessons during their secondary school years, if they repeatedly restarted language learning, if they did not participate in any leisure activities that supported language learning and if they did not have any language-speaking friends.

5. Discussion

In our study we examined the issue of language exam shortages, focusing on a group of students who did not obtain a degree because of the lack of a foreign language exam. Our analysis revealed that high parental status and the parent's (especially the father's) foreign language proficiency have an impact on language exam success. An important new finding is that successful language exam takers are, on average, of higher status and more affluent, so the socio-cultural background may have a significant influence on the chance of passing the language exam. Regarding the social determination of language use, Bernstein (1975) believes that the structure of families within certain social classes is similar, the role relationships are specific, and the relationships within the family together with cultural characteristics form a specific language use.

He calls this language disadvantage a cumulative deficit, which is a disadvantage that causes them to face increasing difficulties during their school career (Bernstein, 1975). The influence of language codes learned in the mother tongue can also be demonstrated in the process of learning foreign languages. Combining these results, we can see that socio-cultural background can have a significant influence on the chances of obtaining a language exam.

Other research has already proven (Bernstein, 1975; Dörnyei, 2001) that positive attitudes toward the culture, community, or foreign friend of the language being studied significantly increase the degree of language development, and thus also the chance of passing the language exam. Our results also show that friends who has good academic achievement and are successful language exam takers are also related to the socio-economic background of the individual, so informal relationships have an impact on achievement.

Our further results show that smaller cities are more likely to have more successful language exam takers. A town and a city is generally an advantage in language exam performance, but those with the best language proficiency in the towns of the studied region goes to the capital or abroad to university, so the children of the towns who stay may be among the weaker ones. Another explanation could be that from towns and cities more people enter higher education, and the weaker students from the weaker secondary schools also get into some higher education nearby, and this does not require as much planning and sacrifice from the family as it would if someone were from the countryside. However, for rural pupils, getting into a higher education institution involves more struggle, more sacrifice on the part of the family and the pupil, and the aspiration to achieve a language examination makes the pupils more motivated. This is why more small towns can have more successful language exam takers.

Few people have pointed out before that people coming from secondary technical schools are less likely to pass the language exams required for a university degree. They are the children of parents with lower status and lower cultural capital - who also have lower language proficiency rates - and are more likely to have attended secondary vocational or technical schools. Also a new finding is that secondary technical school leavers are less likely to have a language exam before the school-leaving examinations. Other research has also shown that students attending secondary technical schools have a lower cultural capital and a higher proportion of low-status parents (Szemerszki, 2015; Csapó, 2002; Varga, 2008; Somfalvi, 2017), and the effect of these factors on academic performance can be demonstrated, thus presumably it also affects the success of language learning. In addition, it can be stated as a fact that the number of language lessons is far below the language lessons of students in high school classes (Imre, 2009). Our analysis also showed that the proportion of language learners who regularly attended 6-8 language classes per week was very high among those who had a language exam. Multilingualism, language specialisation classes and language preparation classes are also typical of schools where children of more highly educated parents attend. It is therefore not possible to say unequivocally that language exams are the success of solely these classes, since if children of highly educated parents are over-represented, this is also an effect of socio-economic status.

An analysis of the relationship between the form of funding of higher education studies and the field of study shows that the fields of study of law, engineering and humanities are over-represented in both the publicly funded courses among those who have passed the language exam and the self-cost students without a language exam. The above-mentioned courses are marketable courses with high entry thresholds, which are the main reason for their popularity and the over-subscription. As a result, full-time entry to these courses is only possible with higher academic results, so they tend to be taken up by students from secondary grammar schools whose parents tend to have higher educational qualifications. The results show that the educational pathway therefore has an impact on language proficiency.

Looking at the overall language learning methods it can be concluded that language exam takers are likely to have been influenced by digitalisation, as it is essential for their typical foreign language film and video watching, music listening and communication situations. This is of course also due to the fact that successful language exam takers tend to be younger. Those who do not have a language exam are more likely to memorise and take notes, which makes language learning a slower process, less motivating and not conducive to the development of all competences. The average age of this group is higher than that of the group who have passed the language exam. Furthermore, the indirect effect of higher educated parents is also evident here, as they have higher cultural capital and a higher proportion of them speak a foreign language than lower educated

parents, and their children are therefore more likely to be interested in foreign language books and films. By combining learning and entertainment, the student acquires the foreign language much more effectively (Palomo-Duarte et al., 2016), and nowadays there are many opportunities to improve language skills through leisure activities, especially with the use of ICT tools, which many studies have shown has already been proven (Esch et al., 2000; Palomo-Duarte et al., 2016).

Overall, since successful language exam takers are mainly the children of more highly educated, language-speaking parents with a higher social status, the importance of language proficiency is higher among them.

6. Conclusion

Our results have brought us closer to understand the factors that contribute to language learning failure: the failure of students who do not obtain a degree due to lack of language exam is mainly due to their socio-economic background, their low language-specific social and cultural capital and their school career. Language learning mistakes and one-sided strategies during their public education also contributed to their failure. Historical trends in language teaching methodology have shown that little account has been taken of social and cultural factors. The results of our research point to the inevitability of taking into account the socio-cultural situation of learners when designing organisational and methodological structures for foreign language teaching. Given the cultural and social diversity of learners and students, eliminating inequalities in language learning outcomes is an educational challenge, and leaving it to families to provide motivation, a foreign language environment and other factors that support foreign language learning is not a satisfactory solution. In the light of our research findings, it is no longer sufficient for language education research and development to focus on middle-class learners. It seems appropriate to consider multifaceted support for foreign language learning for learners from low socio-economic backgrounds.

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Appendix

Table 1. Basic distributions of the questionnaire survey sample

		Did not have language exam at the end of university years (%)	Had language exam (%)
Age	20-30	30	83
	31-40	42	9
	41-50	24	7
	51-	4	1
Gender	male	35	50
	female	65	50
Qualification of mother	maximum primary school	13	4
	vocational qualification without baccalaureate	21	13
	baccalaureate or baccalaureate with vocational qualification	40	52
	degree	26	31
Qualification of father	maximum primary school	8	6
	vocational qualification without baccalaureate	41	31
	baccalaureate or baccalaureate with vocational qualification	40	41
	degree	11	22
Type of settlement	village	39	24
	small town	33	43
	town/city	28	33
Type of secondary school	secondary vocational school	9	1

	secondary technical school	49	26
	secondary grammar school	42	73
Foreign language knowledge of parents	no	72	48
	beginner level	22	32
	intermediate level	4	13
	advanced level	2	7
Foreign language knowledge of friends	no	22	5
	beginner level	41	16
	intermediate level	28	57
	advanced level	9	22

Table 2. Associations between background variables and language exam acquisition (N = 1357) (Stepwise logistic regression analysis)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Gender	1,911***	1,748***	2,278***	1,766***	1,663***
Qualification of mother		NS	NS	NS	NS
Qualification of father		NS	0,686*	NS	NS
Financial status		1,520***	1,441***	1,334***	1,299***
Type of settlement		0,598***	0,584***	0,596***	0,556***
Language knowledge of mother		NS	NS	NS	NS
Language knowledge of father		1,761***	1,650***	1,551*	NS
Cultural capital		1,203***	1,117***	1,190***	NS
Type of secondary school			1,841***	1,683***	1,654***
Language specification			5,570***	3,636***	3,015***
Extracurricular language lessons in secondary education			NS	1,721***	1,700***
Restarting language learning				0,093***	0,101***
Staying abroad				NS	NS
Language learning in higher education				NS	NS
Leisure activities to support language learning				2,030***	1,630*
Importance of language knowledge				2,354***	1,948***
Language-specific social capital					1,976***
Nagelkerke R-Square	,032	,270	,385	,554	,589