




## Parental Perspectives on Early English Language Education: A Quantitative Inquiry into Attitudes and Barriers in a Localised Context

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines parental attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition during early childhood in a Serbian municipality lacking organised early English programmes. Adopting a quantitative research design, survey data collected from 111 parents were analysed via descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and regression analysis. The findings indicate that parents generally perceive the age range of four to six years as the ideal starting point and view early learning as advantageous for social development. However, a discrepancy between parental attitudes and actions was identified; parents exhibit a 'passive interest' due to a lack of institutional support and low self-confidence. The study suggests that local policies should be aligned with parental expectations and that institutional access should be expanded

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### Introduction

English has become the dominant international language of communication, mobility, and economic participation, resulting in its widespread introduction at increasingly younger ages (Enever, 2018). As European countries strengthen policies promoting multilingualism, many have adopted measures that support earlier foreign language exposure, including the European Commission's initiatives on language education and the introduction of early content-and-language programmes such as PROCLIL (Marsh, 1994). The critical period hypothesis (Mihaljević Đigunović & Nikolov, 2006) is frequently cited to justify early instruction, it argues that earlier exposure enhances both language learning processes and naturalistic language acquisition. Language acquisition refers to the natural, subconscious process through which a child learns their first language. In contrast, language learning refers to the conscious study of a language, typically driven by motivation (Hussain, 2017). Consequently, both early English language acquisition, characterised by absorbing the language through exposure and oral practice, and early English language learning, characterised by the formal study of a language and a focus on linguistic theory – are perceived as important components of children's educational trajectories.

In Serbia, early foreign language programmes in preschool institutions are regulated by the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (Republic of Serbia, 2017), which permits specialised programmes for children in preschools. Private preschools more commonly offer such programmes, whereas public preschools provide them primarily in large urban centers (Visački, 2016; Janković & Prošić-Santovac, 2022). By 2011, only two state institutions had implemented bilingual programmes on a pilot basis (Kampel, 2011, as cited in Janković & Prošić-Santovac, 2022). According to the *City of Belgrade* (2025), English language sessions for children are free of charge in both public and private kindergartens in Belgrade. Nevertheless, early English language instruction remains unevenly distributed across the country. As a result, children's access to early English language learning

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and acquisition opportunities is highly dependent on local resources and parental initiative.

Language policy implementation depends not only on institutional frameworks, but also on the beliefs and attitudes of influential stakeholders. Policymakers' orientations towards language education reforms (Filipović, 2014) and locally dominant cultural models (Jovanović, 2014) shape the sociolinguistic environment for the implementation of early English education. Furthermore, parental attitudes are critical, as parents serve as both decision-makers and mediators of children's early language experiences. Their beliefs influence whether children attend early English programmes, how children perceive language learning, and how successfully they engage later on (Enever, 2011). When parents act as motivated and unified groups, they may also exert pressure for changes in local language education policy (Montanari, Fischer & Aceves, 2022), especially in communities where early English programmes are absent.

Although several studies conducted in Europe and Asia have examined parents' perceptions of early English education, research in Serbia remains limited. Serbian studies primarily describe isolated examples of early foreign language programmes and parents' responses to bilingual initiatives in preschools (Šuvaković, 2019; Janković & Prošić-Santovac, 2022). These studies suggest that while parents generally support early English learning, they may simultaneously express doubts about the effectiveness or organisation of such programmes. The tension between positive attitudes and limited action is an important area for further investigation.

The present study aims to address this gap by investigating parental attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition in one Serbian municipality where organised early English programmes do not exist and no official documents addressing the issue are available (PlanPlus, 2025; Municipality of Despotovac, 2025a; 2025b). Exploring parents' beliefs in this context provides insight into the relationships among attitudes, available opportunities and barriers, and decisions about when children should begin learning English. Understanding these attitudes is critical for interpreting local demands, improving early educational planning, and informing broader discussions about multilingual development in Serbia.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Parental attitudes towards foreign language education play a crucial role in shaping children's early experiences with English language learning and acquisition. Numerous studies emphasise that parents influence not only children's motivation and engagement, but also the opportunities children receive to learn a foreign language in early childhood (Enever, 2011). Supportive parental involvement—such as encouraging participation in language-rich activities, enrolling children in early programmes, and providing positive feedback—facilitates more successful early learning processes and contributes to long-term acquisition outcomes (Young, 1994; Rosenbusch, 1987).

A central aspect of parental influence is the degree of parents' own language proficiency. Parents with higher proficiency in English tend to be more involved in their child's language learning, are better able to support homework or language practice, and create more linguistically stimulating environments (Chambers, 1999; Hewitt, 2008). Early parental engagement strengthens children's initial confidence and increases the likelihood of successful future language acquisition (Cotton & Wikelund, 2007). Empirical studies illustrate this connection between parental proficiency and children's language outcomes. For example, Charboneau (2008) conducted a two-year longitudinal study of four Norwegian-English bilingual families and demonstrated that parental language strategies were a key determinant of children's language development, interacting with contextual factors such as motivation, exposure, and family language practices. Families that regularly use foreign languages in professional or social settings offer additional exposure, model positive attitudes, and normalise multilingual behaviour. Examples from Croatia, Sweden, and the Netherlands further demonstrate how everyday communicative needs in tourism or international business can increase children's familiarity with English even before formal schooling (Enever, 2011).

Personal experiences – also shape parental attitudes. Parents who have positive experiences learning English often transmit favourable views to their children, whereas negative past experiences may reduce the value they assign to foreign language learning (Bertram, 2006). Beliefs about the purpose of language learning—such as cultural appreciation, economic mobility, or social integration—further determine how parents perceive the necessity of early exposure. Conversely, parents who minimise the importance of English or openly express

disinterest may undermine their children's willingness to engage in language learning or acquisition (Bertram, 2006).

Importantly, parental attitudes do not always align with parental behaviour. A parent may express strong support for early English exposure yet hesitate to invest in programmes or lack motivation to pursue their own language learning (Gardner et al., 1999). According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997), parents' beliefs about their own abilities can shape the actions they take to support their child's learning. For instance, even if parents value bilingualism, they may underestimate their capacity to facilitate language development or doubt their child's potential to acquire a foreign language (Tinsley & Parker, 2006). When parents prioritise other activities or disregard children's interests, early learning experiences may become stressful, limiting the potential benefits of early acquisition (Brković, 2011). These discrepancies highlight the complexity of parental decision-making and the role of internal and external factors in supporting or limiting early language opportunities.

Previous research on parental attitudes toward bilingualism and early language learning highlights the diversity of perspectives across cultural contexts. For example, Jang (2012) found that Korean parents tend to adopt a holistic view of bilingualism, emphasising the child's ability to communicate fluently in two languages. Similarly, Wu (2005) reported that Chinese parents' attitudes varied depending on whether children were learning Chinese or English, but there was a strong consensus on the importance of preserving the mother tongue as a cultural heritage. These studies demonstrate that parental beliefs are shaped by both linguistic and cultural priorities, reflecting broader societal value.

Building on this line of research, Hasibuan and Pricilia (2024) examined Indonesian parents' attitudes toward early English language learning, noting that global sociocultural and political trends shape these perspectives. The study found a strong parental preference for early English instruction, with English perceived as a valuable skill for future success, international engagement, and responsible parenting. Importantly, the study highlighted that early English learning trends are not solely driven by academic research but also significantly influenced by parents as an active and cohesive community force. Taken together, these findings illustrate how parental attitudes are shaped by both local traditions and global perspectives, creating a nuanced context for understanding early language learning.

Research across different cultural contexts generally indicates that parents favour starting English early, often before their children begin primary school. Studies from Turkey and Croatia report that parents view early English learning as beneficial for children's future careers, social skills, and motivation (Tavil, 2009; Çakici, 2016; Janković, 2020). Parents in these contexts also emphasise the societal value of English, recognising its importance for integration in international environments such as the European Union. However, findings are not entirely consistent: while some parents attribute substantial developmental advantages to early English programmes, others express doubts about whether early exposure leads to measurable long-term acquisition outcomes. This variation underscores the need to consider cultural, social, and individual factors when evaluating parental attitudes towards early language learning.

Sociodemographic variables may also influence attitudes. Parental education and income have been associated with differing levels of support for foreign language programmes, in part reflecting variations in access, resources, and previous educational experiences (Watzke, 2003; Kroeger, 2005). However, many studies report no significant differences based on sex or age, likely because of sample imbalances or limited representation of certain demographic groups (Cansler, 2008; Janković, 2020). Given these mixed findings, further investigation is necessary to understand how demographic factors interact with attitudes in specific local contexts.

Two Serbian studies closely relate to the present research. The first examines early foreign language learning in a primary school in Belgrade, where parental support was essential to the introduction of Italian as an additional language (Šuvaković, 2019). In that case, parents actively facilitated language acquisition by encouraging English learning before school and subsequently supporting additional languages. The second study analyses bilingual Serbian-English preschool programmes, and finds that while parents generally support early bilingual initiatives, they express concerns about the implementation process (Kampel, 2011, as cited in Janković & Prošić-Santovac, 2022). Importantly, even when parental motivation was limited, children in bilingual programmes demonstrated stronger communication skills and greater motivation to acquire knowledge.

Taken together, previous research highlights the importance of understanding parental attitudes through both cognitive (beliefs, expectations) and behavioural (actions, investment) dimensions. These attitudes influence children's early English language learning trajectory, shape perceptions of early acquisition, and contribute to broader sociolinguistic dynamics within communities. The present study builds on this foundation by examining parental attitudes in a municipality without organised early English programmes, offering insight into how beliefs develop in contexts with limited opportunities for early exposure.

## Methods

### Research Design and Purpose

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate parental attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition. The purpose was to expand the existing body of knowledge by examining how parents in one Serbian municipality, where no organised early English programmes exist, perceive the appropriate starting age for English instruction, the benefits and limitations of early exposure, and the relationships between their attitudes and their demographic characteristics. Parents of children in the lower primary grades (grades 1–3) were selected because the time that had elapsed since preschool allowed them to reflect on previous decisions regarding their children's early English experiences.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are parents' attitudes towards early English language learning and early English language acquisition?
2. What is the relationship between parental attitudes and the decision regarding when their child should begin learning English?
3. Do parental characteristics (sex, age, education level, and monthly income) influence attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition?

On the basis of these questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: Parents hold generally positive attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition.
- H2.1. Parental attitudes differ by sex.
- H2.2. Parental attitudes differ by age.
- H2.3. Parental attitudes differ by education level.
- H2.4. Parental attitudes differ by monthly income.

### Participants and Sampling Procedure

The sample consisted of 111 parents of children enrolled in the first three grades of the primary school *Despot Stefan Visoki* in Despotovac, Serbia. A convenience sampling strategy was employed due to practical and contextual considerations, as the target population is not easily accessible through random sampling procedures beyond the institutional setting, and its size is limited. Although this sampling approach limits generalisability of the findings, it enabled the inclusion of information-rich participants who were directly engaged in their children's early English language learning.

Following approval from the school principal, the classroom teachers distributed the printed questionnaires to the parents. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Information about the survey was additionally communicated through existing parent–teacher Viber groups to ensure clarity and encourage participation. The survey remained open for two weeks (late May to early June 2023). Among the total distributed questionnaires, 79.3% were completed and returned.

The participants' demographic characteristics included sex, age group, education level, and monthly household income. These variables were treated as independent variables in the analysis.

### Instrument

Data were collected via a structured questionnaire (Appendix) adapted from previous studies on parental attitudes towards early English learning (Tavil, 2009; Çakici, 2016; Janković, 2020). The instrument consisted of four sections:

1. Sociodemographic information:
  - Sex, age group, education level, and monthly income (categorical items).
2. Parents' English language background:
  - Items on exposure to English at home and work (yes/no).
  - Parents' self-evaluations of English proficiency (5-point Likert scale).
3. Child's prior exposure to English:
  - Items on whether the child had opportunities to learn English prior to school entry and whether early programmes met parent expectations.
  - Four items measuring the perceived efficiency of early English learning and acquisition (3-point Likert scale: yes/no/maybe).
4. Parental attitudes towards early English learning and acquisition:
  - Seven statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).
  - The items assessed beliefs about the advantages of early learning, interest in early acquisition, and the role of formal instruction.

The questionnaire was distributed in Serbian and pilot-checked for clarity. The dependent variables were the composite dimensions of parental attitudes derived through exploratory factor analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed via SPSS 26. The statistical procedures included the following:

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations where appropriate).
  - Means and SDs were reported only for continuous or ordinal Likert-scale items; categorical variables were summarised only by frequencies and percentages.
- Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed via principal component extraction and varimax rotation to determine the underlying dimensions of parental attitudes.
  - Parallel analysis was used to confirm factor retention.
  - Internal consistency was assessed via Cronbach's alpha.
- Inferential analyses:
  - Independent samples t-tests and Levene's test were used to examine differences by sex.
  - Pearson's chi-square tests were used to analyse associations between categorical demographic variables and Likert-scale responses.
  - One-way ANOVA was used to test for differences across age, education, and income groups when assumptions were met.
  - Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests were used to assess normality.
  - Multiple regression analysis was used to evaluate the predictive relationship between the attitude dimensions and parents' chosen optimal starting age.

The assumptions of each statistical procedure were checked and interpreted with respect to the sample size and scale characteristics.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents descriptive findings, factor analysis results, and inferential statistics. All the tables followed APA 7 guidelines, with horizontal lines only above and below the table and above the notes. Statistical notation follows APA conventions (*M*, *SD*, *p*, *N*,  $\chi^2$ , etc.).

### **Descriptive Statistics**

#### *Sample Characteristics*

Among the 111 participating parents, approximately 75% were identified as female, and nearly 50% were between

31 and 40 years old. Half of the sample held higher education degrees (college, university degree or above). The monthly income categories were relatively evenly distributed.

### *Parents' English Language Background*

Table 1 summarises parents' exposure to English and their regret regarding past learning efforts.

Table 1: Parents' Exposure to English and Reflections on Past Learning (N = 111)

Items	yes <i>n</i> (%)	no <i>n</i> (%)
<b>English is present at my workplace and home.</b>	64 (57.7%)	47 (42.3%)
<b>I wish I had spent more time learning English in the past.</b>	96 (86.5%)	15 (13.5%)

### *Parents' Self-Assessment of English Proficiency*

Table 2 presents the distribution of responses to the Likert-scale item assessing parents' English proficiency.

Table 2: Self-Perceived English Proficiency (N = 111)

Item		
<b>My knowledge of English is sufficient, and I do not feel the need for further improvement.</b>		
Response options	<i>n</i>	%
<b>completely applies to me</b>	11	9.9
<b>mainly applies to me</b>	18	16.2
<b>neither applies nor does not apply</b>	23	20.7
<b>mainly does not apply to me</b>	29	26.1
<b>does not apply to me at all</b>	29	26.1

Note. Higher values reflect lower self-assessed proficiency.

### *Children's Early Exposure to English*

Only 10 children had participated in an English programme before starting school. Eight of those parents reported that the programme met expectations *entirely*, *mainly*, or *somewhat*. Two reported that their child did not participate despite the opportunity.

Parents' perceptions of early English learning efficiency were measured via a 3-point scale (yes/no/maybe). Table 3 presents these results.

Table 3: Perceived Efficiency of Early English Learning and Acquisition (N = 111)

Items	yes <i>n</i> (%)	maybe <i>n</i> (%)	no <i>n</i> (%)
<b>Early English learning contributes to future job competitiveness.</b>	28 (25.2%)	43 (38.7%)	40 (36.0%)
<b>Early English learning increases children's self-confidence.</b>	32 (28.8%)	39 (35.1%)	40 (36.0%)

<b>Early English learning improves communication skills.</b>	43 (38.7%)	35 (31.5%)	33 (29.7%)
<b>My child knew English words/songs before official schooling.</b>	43 (38.7%)	9 (8.1%)	59 (53.2%)

### *Optimal Starting Age for English*

Table 4 summarises parents' views on the ideal age to begin English instruction.

Table 4: Parents' Preferred Starting Age for English Learning (N = 111)

<b>Item</b>		
<b>In your opinion, at what age is it best to start learning English?</b>		
<b>Age category</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>0–3</b>	10	9.0
<b>4–6</b>	59	53.2
<b>lower primary school (grades 1-4)</b>	39	35.1
<b>upper primary school (grades 5-8)</b>	3	2.7

Note. Over half of the parents preferred the age range of 4–6 years.

### *Attitudes Towards Early English Learning and Acquisition*

The parents rated seven statements on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher agreement indicated more positive attitudes towards early learning or early acquisition, depending on the item.

The general trends are as follows:

- Strong agreement that knowledge of foreign languages is a valuable asset (92.8% agree/strongly agree).
- High support for early English learning for social development and later learning ease (over 78% agreement).
- Strong disagreement that media can replace formal instruction (over 60% disagree/strongly disagree).
- Considerable uncertainty exists regarding items related to EU membership, child interest, and the sufficiency of the regular schooling system for effective English language development.

### *Factor and Reliability Analysis*

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on seven items from the 5-point Likert scale assessing parental attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition. The correlation matrix showed that all interitem correlations exceed 0.30. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.61, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis (Field, 2018).

Principal component analysis revealed two components with eigenvalues greater than 1, explaining 31.87% and 21.25% of the variance, respectively, for a cumulative variance of 53.12%. The scree plot indicated a clear inflection point after the second component, supporting a two-factor solution. Parallel analysis further confirmed this decision, as the eigenvalues of the two components exceeded both the mean and percentile values of randomly generated datasets (Horn, 1965; Field, 2018). Varimax rotation was applied to clarify the factor structure, as it maximizes factor loading variance and reduces cross-loadings, resulting in a more interpretable and parsimonious solution (Field, 2018).



The rotated solution revealed a two-factor solution:

1. Advantages of early English language learning (4 items)
2. Passive interest in early English language acquisition (3 items)

Table 5: Factor Loadings, Eigenvalues, and Variance Explained (PCA)

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
Importance of early English for social competencies	.72	.18
Importance of early English in the context of EU integration	.68	.21
Importance of early English for later formal foreign language learning	.63	.09
Perceived value of foreign language knowledge	.61	.14
Conditional importance of early English based on child interest.	.12	.71
Perceived sufficiency of the regular school system for English learning	.19	.69
Perceived media sufficiency for English language acquisition	.23	.64

Note. Questionnaire items were restated in nominalised form when presented in the table; the wording reflects the original item content without altering meaning.

Factor statistics	Factor 1	Factor 2
Eigenvalue (rotated)	2.05	1.67
% of variance explained	29.22%	23.91%
Cumulative variance (%)	29.22%	53.12%

Note. Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation. All factor loadings are reported to enhance transparency; primary loadings  $\geq .40$  indicate salient item–factor associations.

The Cronbach's alpha values indicated moderate, though acceptable, internal consistency given the small number of items:

- Factor 1:  $\alpha = .64$
- Factor 2:  $\alpha = .57$

Although Factor 2 exhibited a relatively low reliability coefficient, this is not unexpected in the context of a pilot study with a limited number of items. Furthermore, interitem correlations for both factors fell within recommended range of .20–.40, supporting the overall internal consistency of the scales.

The 3-point scale assessing perceived efficiency of early English learning was not factorable; however, removal of the fourth item increased reliability to 0.57, and the final three-item total score was retained.

### **Correlations and Normality Testing**

Pearson correlations revealed no significant relationship between the two primary factors ( $r = -.12$ ,  $p > .05$ ). No significant correlations were found among the other composite variables.

Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests indicated significant deviations from normality (all  $p < .001$ ). Given the sample size and the ordinal nature of multiple variables, nonnormality was expected and accounted for selecting analyses.



## Group Comparisons

### Sex Differences

Independent-samples *t*-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between sexes for the majority of items.

One item from the first factor (*Importance of early English for social competencies*) approached significance and might yield significant differences in a larger sample.

The participant sample was predominantly female (75%), reflecting the gendered nature of parental involvement in early childhood education in Serbia. This concentration should be considered a limitation when interpreting sex differences reported in Table 6, as the attitudes of male caregivers may be underrepresented.

Table 6: Sex Differences in the ‘Advantages of Early English Learning’ Factor (N = 111)

Items	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Importance of early English for social competencies	−2.55	.014
Importance of early English in the context of EU integration	0.68	.499
Importance of early English for later formal foreign language learning	−0.75	.454
Perceived value of foreign language knowledge	1.16	.249

Note. Only one item reached  $p < .05$ ; interpretation is cautious owing to unequal group sizes.

### Education and Income Differences

Chi-square analyses indicated the following:

- There were no significant differences across income groups.
- Two items differed significantly by education level:
  - Importance of early English for later formal foreign language learning ( $\chi^2(12) = 21.58, p = .042$ )
  - Perceived value of foreign language knowledge (trend-level difference,  $p = .054$ )

No other differences reached statistical significance.

### Regression Analysis

A multiple regression model was used to examine whether the two attitude dimensions and demographic variables predicted parents’ chosen optimal starting age for English instruction.

The model was statistically significant:

- $R = .453$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .147$ ,  $F(7, 96) = 3.53$ ,  $p = .002$

However, no single predictor emerged as uniquely significant, indicating that the combined influence of attitudes and demographics accounted for preferences at the starting age. In contrast, individual predictors did not independently account for substantial variance.

Table 7. Multiple Regression Analysis Model

Model	R	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	df1	df2	p
1	0.453	0.147	3.531	7	96	0.002

Predictor variables: Perceived efficiency of early English learning and acquisition, advantages of early English language learning, passive interest in early English language acquisition, sex, age, education levels, monthly income levels

Dependent variable: Views on the optimal starting age for English language education

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine parental attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition in a Serbian municipality where no formal early English programmes exist. The findings revealed a generally positive orientation towards an early start in English, which is consistent with research from other European contexts (Çakici, 2016; Janković, 2020; Tavi, 2009). However, the results also indicated a discrepancy between parental attitudes and parental actions, suggesting that favourable beliefs alone may not lead to active support for early English exposure when institutional opportunities are absent.

The participants recognize the cognitive, educational, and socio-cultural benefits of early exposure to English. This aligns with findings from Hasibuan and Pricilia (2024) in Indonesia, where parents highlighted English as a tool for future success, international engagement, and responsible parenting. Similarly, Korean and Chinese parents also perceive bilingualism and early English learning as a valuable skill, while emphasising the preservation of the mother tongue (Jang, 2012; Wu, 2005). Norwegian-English bilingual studies have further emphasised the importance of family language strategies in shaping children's outcomes (Charboneau, 2008). In Serbia, these findings suggest that parents' beliefs may play a central role in shaping early English learning practices, consistent with patterns observed in other socio-cultural contexts with strong parental involvement.

More than half of the parents believed that English should be introduced between the ages of four and six. This preference aligns with the critical period hypothesis, which emphasises the benefits of earlier exposure for both learning processes and naturalistic acquisition (Mihaljević Đigunović & Nikolov, 2006). Despite this preference, only 10 children in the sample had participated in early English programmes, suggesting that parents may value early English learning in theory but lack the initiative, resources, or opportunity to implement early exposure in practice. Similar inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviour have been noted in previous studies (Gardner et al., 1999).

Parents' uncertainty regarding the broader developmental or long-term benefits of early English learning may further explain this passive stance. For example, a considerable proportion of parents responded "maybe" to items related to professional competitiveness, communication skills, or self-confidence. This contrasts with findings from Turkey and Croatia, where parents strongly associated early English learning with career and personal advantages (Çakici, 2016; Janković, 2020; Tavi, 2009). The greater uncertainty observed in the present study may reflect limited local access to early programmes, insufficient exposure to examples of early English use, or parents' modest confidence in their own English knowledge.

The role of parents' self-perceived proficiency emerged as an important contextual factor. Nearly 90% of the respondents expressed regret that they had not invested more time in English learning in the past, and almost half reported insufficient confidence in their English knowledge. Research shows that parents with lower self-assessed proficiency are less likely to engage actively in their children's language learning and less likely to initiate opportunities for early exposure (Chambers, 1999; Hewitt, 2008). This phenomenon may help explain the "passive interest in early English acquisition" identified as the second factor in the study's factor analysis.

Consistent with previous findings in Serbia (Šuvaković, 2019; Janković & Prošić-Santovac, 2022), the results indicate that parents tend to support the general idea of early English learning, but simultaneously express doubts about its outcomes or practical implementation. This pattern can be interpreted through Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), which posits that parents with lower perceived efficacy in their own language skills may feel less confident in actively supporting their children's English acquisition, yet still value its importance. Recognising this passive interest is important for policymakers, as it may influence the effectiveness of parent-school partnership in early language programmes.

The widespread disagreement with the statement that media could replace formal instruction confirms parents' belief in structured learning environments, even if such environments are not locally available. However, uncertainty surrounding the role of the child's interest or the relevance of EU integration suggests that many parents do not hold a fully developed stance on the broader goals of early language acquisition.

Demographic variables had minimal influence on parental attitudes. This aligns with studies reporting that gender and age often do not predict attitudes towards early foreign language learning (Cansler, 2008; Janković, 2020). Women were overrepresented in the sample and all male participants held higher education degrees, so no consistent pattern emerged to suggest strong demographic effects. A more balanced male-female participants' distribution would strengthen the generalisability of the findings. The few significant associations with education level warrant cautious interpretation, as they may reflect sample-specific distributions rather than stable effects.

Overall, the findings suggest that while parents conceptually support early English language learning, the absence of local programmes and parents' own limited confidence in English may hinder action. Without institutional support, parents may lack the resources or motivation to seek early English opportunities outside their municipality. These results underscore the importance of viewing parental attitudes not only as beliefs, but also as reflections of environmental, institutional, and socioeconomic constraints.

## Conclusion

The present study examined parental attitudes towards early English language learning and acquisition in a Serbian municipality without organised early English programmes. The first subscale, "advantages of early English language learning," reflects parents' recognition of the cognitive, educational, and socio-cultural benefits of early exposure to English. The second subscale, "passive interest in early English language acquisition," captures a more indirect form of engagement, where parents demonstrate general support without actively participating in language learning activities.

When compared with countries that have similar socio-economic structures but differing language policies, Serbian parents' positive attitudes towards early English introduction are consistent with broader regional trends which prioritise early foreign language learning. However, variations in curriculum regulations, teacher qualifications, and national language policy may influence both parental expectations and children's language outcomes. These comparisons underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches to the design of early English programmes that respond to parental beliefs while aligning with national educational frameworks.

The findings indicate that parents generally support the introduction of English between the ages of four and six and recognise several advantages of early exposure, particularly in relation to social development, smoother later learning in school, and the overall value of language knowledge. These results are consistent with previous research emphasising the growing importance of English as a global language and the perceived benefits of early instruction.

Despite these positive attitudes, parents demonstrated limited initiative to provide early English opportunities. This discrepancy between attitudes and action suggests that practical barriers—such as a lack of local programmes, the limited availability of qualified educators, or parents' low confidence in their own English proficiency—may prevent families from acting on their beliefs. Furthermore, the notable uncertainty surrounding the developmental benefits of early English learning points to the need for clearer information and greater parental engagement.

Demographic factors played only a minor role in shaping attitudes, with few significant differences observed across sexes, education levels, or income levels. Although some variations emerged in relation to parental education, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, given the sample size imbalances. Overall, the results suggest that parental attitudes towards early English are broadly positive, but not strongly differentiated by demographic characteristics.

Taken together, the findings provide insights into both the opportunities and challenges of implementing early English language learning in smaller municipalities in Serbia. While parents value early English exposure, institutional support and greater awareness of the benefits of early learning and acquisition appear necessary to encourage more active parental involvement in initiating early language experiences for their children.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- For policymakers: Local authorities should prioritise to development of free English programmes for children aged four to six, the age range preferred by 53.2% of parents. In municipalities where early English instruction is currently unavailable, partnerships with preschools, private providers, or local institutions

could support the development of age-appropriate programmes. Expanding provision may help bridge the gap between positive parental attitudes and actual early language exposure.

- For Parent Education: Given that 86.5% of parents reported regret regarding their own past language learning experiences, targeted family engagement initiatives should be considered. Adult education or community-based courses may empower parents to participate more confidently in their children's early language development. In addition, workshops, informational materials, or school-led initiatives could support parents' understand of how early English learning contributes to children's long-term linguistic, cognitive, and social development. Clear and accessible communication may reduce uncertainty and encourage more active parental involvement.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

## Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analyzed in this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations, but are available from the author upon reasonable request.

## Ethics statement

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the principal of the primary school in which the research was conducted.

## Consent

All participants were adults. Informed consent was obtained through the questionnaire.

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## Notes on contributor

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## Authors' Contributions

Sandra Z. Tasić  The author was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, and the writing of the manuscript.

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## Appendix

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear parents,

This questionnaire was conducted as part of a research study on parental attitudes towards English language learning and acquisition. Participation was anonymous, and the results were used solely for the purposes of this study.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

**Please circle the answers to the following questions.**

**Sex:** M F

**Age:** a) 21–30

b) 31–40

c) over 40

**Level of education:** a) primary school

b) secondary school

c) college

d) university degree or above

**Monthly income:** a) 44,000 RSD or less

b) 44,000–58,000 RSD

c) 58,000–81,000 RSD

d) 81,000 RSD or more

**1. English is present at my workplace and home.**

yes

no

**2. I wish I had spent more time learning English in the past.**

yes

no

**3. My knowledge of English is sufficient, and I do not feel the need for further improvement.**

a) completely applies to me

b) mainly applies to me

c) neither applies nor does not apply to me

d) mainly does not apply to me

e) does not apply to me at all

**Please answer the following questions according to the instructions.**

**1. Has your child had the opportunity to attend English classes before starting school?**

yes

no

*\* If your answer to this question (Question 1) is “yes”, answer the following question:*

**2. Did your child attend English classes before starting school?**

yes

no



*\* If your answer to this question (Question 2) is “yes”, answer the following question:*

**3. Did the English language programme your child attended meet your initial expectations?**

- a) entirely
- b) mainly
- c) somewhat
- d) only to a small extent

*\* If the answer to this question (Question 3) is “yes”, proceed directly to Question 8*

**4. Early English learning contributes to future job competitiveness.**

yes  
no  
maybe

**5. Early English learning increases children’s self-confidence.**

yes  
no  
maybe

**6. Early English learning improves communication skills.**

yes  
no  
maybe

**7. My child knew English words/songs before official schooling.**

yes  
no  
maybe

**8. In your opinion, at what age is it best to start learning English?**

- a) 0–3 years
- b) 4–6 years
- c) lower primary school (grades 1 –4)
- d) upper primary school (grades 5–8)

**Please mark (X or another symbol) the extent to which you agree with each statement on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – mostly disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – mostly agree, 5 – strongly agree**

Parental Attitudes	1	2	3	4	5
1. It is important for a child to attend an early English programme because it helps develop social competencies					
2. It is important for a child to attend an early English programme because Serbia is in the process of joining the EU					
3. It is important for a child to attend an early English programme because it facilitates easier learning of the foreign language in the first grade of primary school and later on					
4. Knowledge of foreign languages is a valuable asset					
5. It is important for a child to attend an early English programme only if the child shows interest					
6. The regular school system and education are sufficient for effective English learning					
7. Foreign language schools and English learning programmes today can be replaced by the media					