

# Kosovan Parents' and Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the English Language Teaching and Learning in the First Grade

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**Abstract**—The importance attributed to English as the lingua franca of our days has influenced the decisions of the education authorities in many countries to change their language learning policies and introduce English in very early stages of formal education. The present study aimed at unfolding the Kosovan parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade. This quantitative research included 400 participants, 200 parents and 200 class teachers randomly selected from 56 elementary schools of the country. The research instruments were two structured questionnaires, one for the parents and the other for the teachers, each containing 15 questions related to the topic, whereas the research data were analyzed via the SPSS program. The research results indicate that a considerable percentage of Kosovan parents and teachers do not support the inclusion of English as an obligatory subject in the first grade, mainly because they fear it may interfere negatively with the learning of their mother tongue.

**Index Terms**— parents, teachers, perceptions, English, first grade

## I. INTRODUCTION

The age of globalization with its tremendous developments in all fields of life has greatly contributed to the people's ineluctable necessity to learn English because of the many advantages that the knowledge of this language provides. Spoken by 1.5 billion speakers worldwide, English has already achieved the status of a global language (Crystal, 2003), and according to Graddol (1997), it "is unlikely to be displaced as the world's most important language" (p. 2). Furthermore, he suggests that by 2040, the number of English speakers will have increased to 3 billion (Graddol, 1997). Nevertheless, the majority of English speakers are people who have learned English as a foreign or second language, whereas the number of native English speakers, already a minority, is constantly decreasing (Harmer, 2007).

There are several factors that have contributed to the widespread use of the English language. Crystal (2003) emphasizes the political and military power, but in today's circumstances its impact is not as prominent as it was before. Harmer (2007), on the other hand, suggests a list of five factors, namely the colonial history, economics, information exchange, travel, and popular culture. However, in the age of globalization, the information exchange exercises a strong influence on other factors as they are closely intertwined, and the Internet, as a dominant information channel, has certainly had a crucial impact on English, as it is de facto its universal language.

The mastery of English has become imperative because people are insightful regarding the advantages that the knowledge of English provides, therefore, recent decades have seen extraordinary efforts by all the stakeholders especially in the field of education to encourage the learning of the language. Parents, especially younger and more educated ones, encourage their children to learn the language from an early age and speak it fluently, and they do it for various reasons, primarily because they think that a decent knowledge of the language can offer them the opportunity for a better education, and, consequently, a better life perspective, but also because it can simply help them become successful global citizens, people capable of interacting with others regardless of their national, religious, cultural, language, and other backgrounds in different social and cultural circumstances. Thus, they tend to encourage bilingualism as they see it as a valuable asset with all the benefits that the knowledge of English implies.

It is not uncommon nowadays to hear cases of young Kosovan parents who raise their children with English as a first language because they want their children to speak the language as fluently as native speakers, thus completely disregarding their mother tongue, what subsequently becomes quite problematic once these children start the school, and their teachers have problems communicating with them in Albanian. According to Crystal (2003), there are many

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such cases in the world, but he claims that despite their contribution to the language, these children's intuition about the language will surely differ from that of, as he calls them, "traditional native speakers". The said parents, however, are not discouraged, they are not bothered by their children's inability to speak their native language properly as long as they are "fluent" in English. They insist on their children's language fluency because it is used, among others, as an important score in assessing their oral skills in examinations (Kormos, 2006). Kosovan teachers, on the other hand, have misgivings with regard to this issue because they are being challenged in their own classrooms by these parents and their children.

Before 2000, English was taught as a foreign language in all elementary schools in Kosovo from the fifth grade, later, in the 2000s, it was taught from the third grade. However, English became a compulsory subject in the first grade in 2016, following a decision of the then Minister of Education, and it was even included in the preparatory grade, although the preparatory grade itself is still not mandatory, and not all Kosovan children attend it. Moreover, prior to this decision, English had already been introduced to Kosovan first graders in 40 elementary schools of the country that were selected for piloting the curriculum framework of pre-university education of the Republic of Kosovo and core curriculum 2014/2015 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MEST], 2016), and, at the time, it had encountered various, mostly negative, reactions among teachers and parents. Therefore, this study is the result of extensive meetings and discussions with Kosovan parents and teachers regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade, and the implications that it might have in the long run because it has been observed that there is a range of mixed perceptions and attitudes among the above-mentioned stakeholders whether children should start learning the language at school so early.

The main aim of this study was to analyze the Kosovan parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade as well as analyze and discuss all relevant aspects of the problem, thus providing a quite thorough picture of the current situation related to this topic in our country. The key research questions were as follows:

1. What are the Kosovan parents' perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade?
2. What are the Kosovan teachers' perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent decades have been marked by a range of discussions concerning the ideal age children should be exposed to a foreign or second language, and this has been a matter of an everlasting dispute among the policy-makers, educational experts, teachers, and parents.

When should children start learning a foreign or second language? This is a question whose final answer researchers have not been able to provide yet since the current research evidence indicates that certain attitudes and beliefs do not have a sound foundation. Even though the majority support the belief "the earlier, the better", there are others who disagree with this assertion. However, it is precisely the widespread belief that an early exposure to language would give children a good start to becoming successful language learners that has encouraged the policy-makers in education to insist on introducing a foreign or second language as a compulsory subject from the very first grade, and even earlier.

The view "the earlier, the better" relies on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), a theory in neurolinguistics that states that the brain loses its plasticity as people experience natural maturation and brain functions related to language learning are prone to a gradual decline, therefore an early exposure to language is crucial in attaining a native-like proficiency (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). The question is how early? The said plasticity is said to be at its peak only in the first few years of a person's life, and its subsequent decline affects our language processing skills (Saxton, 2017). According to the CPH, this explains why people who have started to learn a second language after the so-called "critical period" can never achieve the native speakers' language proficiency (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). This applies particularly to the second language learners' accent (Cameron, 2001). Researchers claim that the critical period affects different aspects of language, especially phonology and grammar, but accent is the one they usually emphasize. Furthermore, Tabors (2008), argues that accent is the only feature in the language learning process that is affected by the age factor, and consequently, older learners are less likely to attain the native speakers' accent than young children. According to Bavin (2009), if children start learning a second language early, their second language skills will not differ from those of the native speakers, and the term he uses to refer to children who learn two languages before the age of nine is "childhood bilingual". However, Ortega (2013), argues that it is premature to accept the view that the critical period affects the second language learning because despite the evidence that indicates that late and adult second language learners achieve lower levels of language attainment than the early ones, and that the age effect is undeniable, nevertheless, there are also cases of exceptional learners whose introduction to a second language took place rather late, after their twenties, and they still managed to attain an almost native-like proficiency, and we can barely distinguish them from native speakers.

Until the end of the 20th century, it was thought that the first language acquisition was complete by the age of five, but now we know that this is no longer true (Cameron, 2001). Clark (2009) suggests that children under the age of six are still in the process of learning their first language. Cameron (2001) goes a step further and argues that at the age of seven children are still in the process of improving their discourse skills, which process extends throughout their early school years. It is only by the age of eight to ten that children attain competence of their native language with all its

basic elements, and a language awareness which they may use in their second language acquisition (Scott & Ytreberg, 1995). That is why Moon (2000) asserts that children as second language learners bring with them to the second language classroom the experience of language gained while they were learning their first language.

The hypothesis that children are better second language learners than adults has often been used to support the early introduction of foreign language education (Cameron, 2001). However, what the relevant stakeholders have failed to consider is the fact that an early exposure to the second language may have a negative impact on the child's first language development (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). De Boot (2014), on the other hand, claims that more exposure to English as a foreign language does not affect the development of the mother tongue. According to Atkinson (2011), "children's early appropriation of language is implicit" (p. 25), and in regard to this statement, it can be said that, in fact, children can be better second language learners than adults, but only if the process of second language acquisition at an early age is implicit rather than explicit, and they are not forced to learn it in a formal educational environment. Cameron (2011) also asserts that children who start learning a second language earlier do have certain advantages that regard the listening comprehension and pronunciation over those who start it later, but this is applicable only if the learning process takes place in natural contexts. Research results indicate that if the language teaching and learning process takes place in a classroom and instruction is explicit, older learners can surpass the younger ones because of their higher cognitive skills (Krashen et al., 1979; Mun  z, 2006, as cited in Jaekel et al., 2017). Moreover, Jaekel et al. (2017) claim that the common belief that younger learners are better than the older ones is just a myth. There is research evidence that supports the claim that greater cognitive maturity is the reason why older children outperform the younger ones in the language learning process (Barac et al., 2014, as cited in Canto, 2019). Johnstone (2002) also argues that age is not the only factor that influences the second language learning, it is rather only one in a cluster of factors, "few of which can be scientifically controlled" (p. 9). Furthermore, according to Butler (2012), the current major second and foreign language acquisition theories disregard the socio-economic dimensions as a very important factor that accounts for the gaps in the learners' achievement of English.

Lightbown and Spada (2013), argue that introduction to second language education should depend on the goals to be achieved; consequently, if the goal of the second language learner is to achieve the native-like mastery of the second language, then it is better to start the second language learning process as early as possible, but if the goal is to acquire the communicative skills with the intention that the native language remains the first language in the educational system, a later start is recommended. An early introduction to second language learning should not be determined neither by necessity nor by desirability (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) because the scope of the second language learning in the 21st century is experiencing a consistent expansion (Long, 2015).

According to Garton and Copland (2019), one of the most important reforms undertaken globally in the field of second language education, namely English instruction, in the recent years, is the lowering of the learners' age. Thus, we have seen many countries of the world undertaking the necessary reforms to implement the policy of including English in the lower grades of elementary education. The age varies from country to country, but there is a common tendency to introduce English at the very start of elementary education. According to Shin and Crandall (2014), more than 50 % of the teachers from 55 countries of the world, who participated in their survey, reported the introduction of English as a compulsory subject in the third grade.

The East Asia region has shown an exceptional readiness to implement the necessary reforms. Thus, in China, as the largest country in the world, children start learning English in the third grade, and in some cities, even in the first grade, at the age of six (Garton & Copland, 2019). However, in public elementary schools of China, children are not allowed to start learning English earlier than the third grade because of the many teachers and parents' concern that an early exposure to English might affect their children's learning of Chinese (Chen et al., 2020). In Taiwan, English is also introduced in the third grade, but research findings indicate that 86.7 % of the second-grade students learn English earlier than the government's mandate because of their parents' expectations (Chang, 2008). Taiwanese parents consider early English education very important as it can offer their children better career opportunities (Ching-Ying, 2016). Furthermore, results of the research carried out by Lee and Chou (2014) indicate that the parents' education level and the region they come from, also has a significant impact on their attitudes towards an early exposure to English. In South Korea, the starting age is 9, the third grade (Garton & Copland, 2019). In Japan, on the other hand, until 2011, English was taught from the seventh grade, but now, in all Japanese public schools, children start learning English in the fifth grade (Chen et al., 2020), and in this regard Japan is lagging behind compared to other Asian countries. In Hong Kong, because of its colonial history, children start learning English at the age of three (Garton & Copland, 2019). In India, English is generally taught from the third grade, even though in some regions, it is introduced in the fifth grade. In the United Arab Emirates, since 2012, English is introduced in all public schools in the fourth grade, at the age of 9 (Alshahrani, 2016) since Arab teachers consider that an early introduction to a foreign language could negatively impact the students' writing skills of their native language (Al-Yaseen, 2021).

Research evidence indicates that in African countries that were once British colonies, such as Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, English is introduced simultaneously with their mother tongues (Garton & Copland, 2019); in African Arabic-speaking countries such as Egypt, Libya, Sudan as well as Somalia, English is introduced in the second grade, whereas in former French colonies, such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Chad, French is favored to English, therefore English is introduced much later, mainly in the secondary education.

Latin American countries have also seen significant reforms regarding the instruction of English thus Argentina and Brazil are the countries that introduce English in the first grade along with another optional language (Garton & Copland, 2019).

Among the larger North American countries, Mexico, as the largest country in which English is not a native language, introduces English in the first grade, at the age of six, in Canada, as a bilingual country, a second language is mandatory in the fifth grade, at the age of ten, whereas in the USA, a second language is introduced in the secondary education, and not in all the states (Moore, 2021).

In European countries, there is a great diversity regarding the age to which children are exposed to English in formal educational institutions. Thus, in Belgium, in Germanophone and Flemish state schools, English is introduced at the age of three, whereas in Francophone schools at the age of four (Lourenço & Mourão, 2017). Italy, Spain, Norway, Denmark, Albania and Kosovo are among the few countries in which English is mandatory in the first grade, at the age of six (Hopping, 2014; Ferati et al., 2019; DZHAP, 2016). From 2020, Finnish children start learning a foreign language, mainly English, in the second semester of the first grade, at the age of seven (Järvinen-Taubert, 2020). In Croatia, Latvia, Macedonia, Sweden and Serbia, English is taught from the first grade, at the age of seven (Brumen et al., 2009; Ferati et al., 2019). Turkey has adopted a regulation change that makes English a compulsory subject in the second grade, at the age of seven (Çakici, 2016). Austrian children also start learning English at the age of seven, in the second grade (Expatica, 2022). In Bulgaria, English is introduced as a compulsory subject in the second grade, at the age of eight (Ferati et al., 2019), whereas in Portugal, children are exposed to English in the third grade, at the age of eight (Lourenço & Mourão, 2017). In the Check Republic and Greece, children also start learning English at the age of 8, in the third grade (Ferati et al., 2019). In Germany, English is mandatory in the secondary education level (Hopping, 2014), however, depending on the type of school, children can be exposed to English in the third grade or the fifth grade. In France, children elect a foreign language, that is mainly English, at the age of 8-10 (Ferati et al., 2019), even though in eastern regions of the country, English is taught in the second grade, at the age of seven. In Hungary, English is mandatory from the fourth grade, at the age of 10. In Netherlands, English is also introduced as an obligatory subject at the age of 10, in the fifth grade. Children in Poland start learning a foreign language at the age of six, in the first grade, but that is not necessarily English, however, English becomes mandatory at the age of 12/13 (Ferati et al., 2019). Being the country with the largest English-speaking population in Europe, England exposes children to a foreign language at Key Stage 2 (age 7-11), one hour per week (Myles, 2017).

The statistics indicate that many countries have already lowered the starting age for compulsory language learning, however, according to EF EPI (English Proficiency Index) of 2021, the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills, out of 112 countries of the world, Netherlands is ranked the first, followed by Austria, Denmark, Singapore, Norway, Belgium, Portugal, Sweden, Finland and Croatia as top ten countries of the list, and most of these countries introduce English as a compulsory subject after the age of six, furthermore, in the country that is ranked the first - Netherlands, English is introduced later than in most countries of the world, what obviously challenges the belief "the earlier, the better", and supports the claims that the evidence concerning the age effect on second language learning is "far from being settled" (Ortega, 2013, p. 23).

### III. METHODOLOGY

This quantitative research was conducted with 400 participants, 200 parents and 200 elementary school teachers (class teachers) of the first graders, randomly selected from 56 elementary schools of the country. The class teachers were deliberately chosen over the English teachers because working closely with their pupils for several hours per day gives them the opportunity to better evaluate the impact that a new subject, English in this case, and a new teacher have on their learning process, but also because they are more objective in this regard.

The research instruments were two questionnaires, one for the teachers and the other for the parents, each containing 15 questions related to the research topic, 10 of which being 5-point Likert scale questions with answers from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Both questionnaires were divided into two sections, the first one containing questions whose answers obtained demographic information on the research participants, whereas the second section contained the key question that obtained answers regarding the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school, i.e., whether the participants favored the first grade or not, and other questions regarding the parents' and teachers' perceptions on the English language teaching and learning in the first grade.

The research data were analyzed via the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program, version 25.

### IV. RESULTS

The frequency analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaires regarding the parents' and teachers' perceptions on the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school are presented in the following tables, Table 1 and Table 2, respectively. The results indicate that a considerable percentage of Kosovan parents and teachers do not favor the introduction of English as an obligatory subject in the first grade.

TABLE 1  
PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE MOST APPROPRIATE GRADE TO START LEARNING ENGLISH AT SCHOOL.

Grade	Frequency	Percent
The prep grade	24	12.0%
The 1st grade	67	33.5%
The 2nd grade	32	16.0%
The 3rd grade	62	31.0%
The 5th grade	15	7.5%
Total	200	100%

Table 1 indicates that 12% of the parents think that children should start learning English in the preparatory grade, followed by 33.5% who favor the first grade, and this shows that 45.5% of the parents advocate an early start in learning English at school. Nevertheless, as seen from Table 1, a lot of parents support the introduction of English after the first grade, hence 16% of the parents favor the second grade, 31% the third grade, and 7.5% of them the fifth grade, thus providing a rather high percentage - 54.5%, even though comparing all the percentages obtained, it can be seen that the highest percentage belongs to the parents who support the introduction of English in the first grade - 33.5%, albeit it is only slightly higher than the percentage of those who favor the third grade - 31%.

TABLE 2  
TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE MOST APPROPRIATE GRADE TO START LEARNING ENGLISH AT SCHOOL.

Grade	Frequency	Percent
The prep grade	28	14.0%
The 1st grade	47	23.5%
The 2nd grade	37	18.5%
The 3rd grade	80	40.0%
The 5th grade	8	4.0%
Total	200	100%

Table 2 indicates that out of 200 teachers, 14% think that children should start learning English in the preparatory grade, whereas 23.5% of them favor the first grade, and this shows that 37.5% of the teachers believe that an early introduction to English at school would benefit the children. However, 18.5% of the class teachers claim that the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school is the second grade, followed by 40% of the teachers who favor the third grade, and 8% who favor the fifth grade, thus providing a rather high percentage - 62%, that testifies to the teachers' disapproval of introducing English in the first grade.

TABLE 3  
GENDER DIFFERENCES REGARDING THE PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE MOST APPROPRIATE GRADE TO START LEARNING ENGLISH AT SCHOOL.

Parents' perceptions regarding the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	Female	144	2.72	1.18	.099
Male	56	3.30	1.11	.148	

Table 3 shows that there are gender differences regarding the parents' perceptions on the most appropriate grade to start learning English. The mean and the standard deviation for the female parents are  $M = 2.72$  and  $SD = 1.18$ , whereas the mean and the standard deviation for the male parents are  $M = 3.30$  and  $SD = 1.11$ , and this indicates that male parents show a greater level of support than female parents regarding the introduction of English in the first grade. However, the Levene's test was used to determine whether these differences are statistically significant.

TABLE 4  
LEVENE'S TEST FOR EQUALITY OF VARIANCES

Independent Samples Test / Gender	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	T	Df.	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
Parents' perceptions regarding the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school	Equal variances assumed	.303	.583	-2.818	198	.005	-.478	.170	-.813	-.144
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.962	111.567	.004	-.478	.161	-.798	-.158

The results presented in Table 4 show that the gender differences are statistically significant because the probability in 95% of the cases is lower than 0.05 ( $p < 0.005$ ), and the significance is 0.005. Therefore, it can be concluded that

male parents are more supportive than female parents with regard to the introduction of English as an obligatory subject in the first grade.

TABLE 5  
CORRELATION BETWEEN THE PARENTS' EDUCATION AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE MOST APPROPRIATE GRADE TO START LEARNING ENGLISH AT SCHOOL

Parents' education		
Parents' perceptions regarding the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school	Pearson Correlation	.034
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.631
	N	200

Table 5 presents the data that show the correlation between the parents' education and their perceptions on the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school, and results indicate that there is no correlation between the two because  $P > 0.05$  and sig. 0.631.

TABLE 6  
CORRELATION BETWEEN THE TEACHERS' WORK EXPERIENCE AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS ON THE MOST APPROPRIATE GRADE TO START LEARNING ENGLISH AT SCHOOL.

Teachers' work experience		
Teachers' perceptions regarding the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school	Pearson Correlation	-.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.265
	N	200

As seen from Table 6, results indicate that there is no correlation between the teachers' work experience and their perceptions on the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school because  $P > 0.05$  and sig. 0.265. In order to ascertain whether there are statistically important differences between the teachers' age and their perceptions regarding the most appropriate grade to start learning English, we used the ANOVA test, the Scheffe procedure.

TABLE 7  
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TEACHERS' AGE AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE MOST APPROPRIATE GRADE TO START LEARNING ENGLISH.

(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
22-30	31-40	.761*	.207	.004			
	41-50	.396	.224	.375	-.24	1.03	
	51-65	.379	.233	.450	-.28	1.04	
31-40	22-30	-.761*	.207	.004	-1.34	-.18	
	41-50	-.364	.245	.533	-1.06	.33	
	51-65	-.381	.254	.521	-1.10	.33	
41-50	22-30	-.396	.224	.375	-1.03	.24	
	31-40	.364	.245	.533	-.33	1.06	
	51-65	-.017	.268	1.000	-.77	.74	
51-65	22-30	-.379	.233	.450	-1.04	.28	
	31-40	.381	.254	.521	-.33	1.10	
	41-50	.017	.268	1.000	-.74	.77	

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As seen from Table 7, multiple comparisons were conducted regarding the teachers' age and their perceptions on the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school, and results indicate that there are significant differences only between the teachers age 22-30 and those age 31-40, with the mean difference being 0.761 ( $p < 0.05$ ) and sig. 0.04.

TABLE 8  
PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE FIRST GRADE

	n %	n %	n %	n %	n %	M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Your child is very interested in learning English in the first grade.	3.0	11.5	28	15.5	42	3.82	1.18
The decision of MEST to make the English language a compulsory subject in the first grade is the right one.	18.5	31.5	18	22	10	2.74	1.27
Learning English in the first grade interferes negatively with the learning of the mother tongue.	10	21.5	21.5	36	11	3.17	1.18
Your child uses English words when he/she speaks Albanian.	21	24.5	35.5	15.5	3.5	2.56	1.09
You are satisfied with your child's knowledge of English obtained at school.	6	15	22	44	13	3.43	1.08
Your child's English teacher is sufficiently qualified to work with first grade pupils.	7.5	14	25	45	8.5	3.33	1.06
English textbooks used in the first grade are age-appropriate.	8.5	21.5	22.5	42	5.5	3.15	1.08
Your child's English teacher cooperates with you as a parent in the language learning process.	20.5	23	19.5	32	5	2.78	1.27
You are satisfied with the English teacher's work.	10	12.5	28	38	11.5	3.28	1.13
Your child is satisfied with his/her English teacher.	6.5	15.5	18	43	17	3.49	1.13

Note: 1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neutral, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly agree.

Table 8 presents the parents' perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade based on the ten statements relevant to the process included in the parents' questionnaire. The results indicate that 57.5% of the parents agree that their children are very interested in learning English in the first grade, 14.5% disagree, and 28% of the parents are neutral. Only 32% of the parents agree that the decision of MEST to make the English language a compulsory subject in the first grade is the right one, 18% are neutral, and 50% of the parents don't think that this decision is the right one. 47% of the parents think that learning English in the first grade interferes negatively with the learning of the mother tongue, 21.5% are neutral, and 31.5% of the parents contradict this opinion. Only 19% of the parents have heard their children using English words when they speak Albanian, 35.5% are neutral, what means that either the parents do not speak English and do not understand English words, or they think that this is irrelevant, whereas 44.5% of the parents disagree with the statement. 57% of the parents are satisfied with their children's knowledge of English obtained at school, 22% are neutral, and only 21% of the parents are not satisfied. 53.5% of the parents agree that their children's English teachers are sufficiently qualified to work with first grade pupils, 25% are neutral, and 21.5% do not support the claim. Since parents are supposed to help their children with their homework, they have surely formed an opinion on the content of the book, therefore 47.5% of the parents agree that English textbooks used in the first grade are age-appropriate, 22.5% are neutral, and 30% of the parents disagree. 37% of the parents agree that their children's English teachers cooperate with them as parents in the language learning process, 19.5% are neutral, and 43.5% of the teachers deny any cooperation with their children's English teachers. However, in spite of the considerable lack of cooperation between the parents and the English teachers, 49.5% of the teachers seem to be satisfied with the English teachers' work, 28% are neutral, whereas 32.5% of the parents do not think that their children's English teachers are doing a good job. However, they have given different answers in regard to whether the children are satisfied with their English teachers, therefore, 60% of the parents think that their children are satisfied with their English teachers, 18% are neutral, and only 22% of the parents seem to think that their children are not satisfied with their English teachers.

TABLE 9  
TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE FIRST GRADE

	n %	n %	n %	n %	n %	M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Your pupils are very interested in learning English in the first grade.	2.5	6.5	30	24.5	36.5	3.86	1.06
The decision of MEST to make the English language a compulsory subject in the first grade is the right one.	16.5	34	14	17.5	18	2.86	1.37
Learning English in the first grade interferes negatively with the learning of the mother tongue.	11.5	20	17	40.5	11	3.19	1.21
Your pupils use English words when they speak Albanian.	13.5	18	35.5	30	3	2.91	1.06
You are satisfied with your first graders' knowledge of the English language obtained at school.	3	16	38.5	28	14.5	3.35	1.01
English teachers are sufficiently qualified to work with first grade pupils.	9	13	19.5	33.5	25	3.52	1.24
English textbooks used in the first grade are age-appropriate.	4.5	16.5	37.5	27	14.5	3.31	1.05
The English teacher cooperates with you as a class teacher.	3.5	15.5	15	39	27	3.71	1.12
You are satisfied with the English teacher's work.	6	24	40	28	2	3.90	.89
Your pupils are satisfied with their English teacher.	3	5	19.5	38.5	34	3.96	1.00

Note: 1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neutral, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly agree.

Table 9 presents the teachers' perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade based on the ten statements relevant to the process included in the teachers' questionnaire. The results indicate that 61% of the teachers think that their pupils are very interested in learning English in the first grade, not surprisingly since most children of that age are curious about new languages, 30% are neutral, whereas only 9% disagree. In line with the answers regarding the most appropriate grade to start learning English at school, 50.5% of the teachers do not think that the decision of MEST to make English a compulsory subject in the first grade is the right one, 14% are neutral, whereas 35.5% disagree. In line with their answers to the key question of the questionnaire, 51.5% of the teachers have shown agreement with the statement that learning English in the first grade interferes negatively with the learning of the mother tongue, 17% are neutral, and 31.5% of them disagree with the statement. 33% of the teachers claim that their pupils use English words when they speak Albanian, 35.5% are neutral, and 31.5% of the teachers haven't heard their pupils use English words. However, 42.5% of the teachers seem to be satisfied with their first graders' knowledge of the English language obtained at school, 38.5% are neutral, and 19% of the teachers have shown disagreement with the statement. In regard to the English teachers' qualifications, 58.5% of the class teachers agree that English teachers are sufficiently qualified to work with first grade pupils, 19.5% are neutral, whereas 21% think that they are not sufficiently qualified for the job. Concerning the English textbooks used in the first grade, 41.5% of the teachers agree that they are age-appropriate, 37.5% are neutral, and 21% disagree. 66% of the teachers agree that English teachers cooperate with them as class teachers, 15% are neutral, and only 19% claim that English teachers do not cooperate with them. Only 30% of the teachers agree to being satisfied with the English teachers' work, 40% are neutral, and 30% of the teachers are not satisfied. Nevertheless, according to their teachers, pupils seem to have a different opinion since 72.5% of the class teachers agree that pupils are satisfied with their English teachers, 19.5% are neutral, and only 8% think that their pupils are not satisfied with their English teachers.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Parents and teachers' perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade constitute an important factor that may influence the pupils' success in this process, and it needs to be taken very seriously by the decision-making bodies when they approve relevant educational policies. The present study aimed at shedding some light on this issue based on the analyses of the data that resulted from two questionnaires completed by 400 Kosovan parents and teachers. Despite the fact that the knowledge of English provides social, economic, and cultural advantages that parents aspire for their children, and surely, teachers for their pupils, the research results indicate that a considerable percentage of Kosovan parents and teachers do not support the introduction of English as an obligatory subject in the first grade (55.5% parents, 62.5% teachers). The percentage of parents and teachers who contradict the inclusion of English as an obligatory subject in the first grade, when children have nine other subjects as well, corresponds to the assertions made by most of them that it interferes negatively with the learning of the mother tongue.



A similar concern is also shared by Chinese parents and teachers (Chen et al., 2020) although de Bot (2014) would clearly disagree as he argues that learning English cannot affect the development of the mother tongue.

Nevertheless, we should not disregard the relatively high percentage of parents and teachers who prefer an early introduction to English, namely in the preparatory grade and in the first grade, 45.5% and 37.5% respectively, thus embracing the argument the “earlier, the better”, even though the existing body of empirical research doesn’t lend much support to the claim (Garton & Copland, 2019), furthermore, according to Munoz (2009), there are studies that suggest that an early introduction to a foreign language may result with “extremely limited” benefits. It is important to emphasize that the obtained results don’t reveal a tendency toward code-switching among the children exposed to English in the first grade since only 19% of the parents and 33% of the teachers confirm to have heard the children use English words when speaking Albanian, but this could also imply the parents’ failure to perceive such attempts, especially if they do not speak English themselves, or the teachers’ indifference. Teacher qualification and age-appropriate textbooks, as two very important factors, have also been raised as questions which resulted with unexpected responses of Kosovan parents and teachers because the percentages derived from the data analysis are not in accordance with the actual situation in the field. Most of the parents and teachers agree that their children/pupils’ English teachers are sufficiently qualified for work with children, and by this they probably mean they hold a degree in English, however, Kosovan universities and colleges currently offer only English teaching programs that prepare teachers for work with high school students, whereas the last program at the Faculty of Education that prepared English teachers for work with pupils from grades 5-9 was closed for new enrollments in 2013, therefore English teachers in Kosovo are in dire need of specific trainings for work with young learners, and we can mention one element related to this issue that has been dealt with in this research and justifies the demand, namely the lack of cooperation between the parents and their children’s English teachers. Concerning the textbooks, a relatively high percentage of parents (47.5%) and teachers (41.5%) agree that they are age-appropriate. In line with the abovementioned responses, parents and teachers seem to be generally satisfied with the knowledge children obtain at school and the English teachers’ work, but it is interesting to note that they display a whole new level of satisfaction when they speak on behalf of their children/pupils, and the obtained percentages on this matter are not in accordance with what was expected when this research was initiated and the feedback we received from numerous meetings with teachers and parents. However, the high percentage of children’s satisfaction with their English teachers did not affect the parents and teachers’ responses concerning this issue. We can say that the teachers and parents’ perceptions regarding the English language teaching and learning in the first grade are generally similar. There is one aspect, however, that is worth emphasizing, and it concerns their choices on the most appropriate grade to introduce English at school. Since the results have already established that a considerable percentage of both parents and teachers do not support the inclusion of English as an obligatory subject in the first grade, considering the impact it may have on the mother tongue, and also the high number of subjects Kosovan children have to cope with in the first grade as well as long term consequences such a workload may have on children as they go through their developmental stages, a compromise they would surely agree on, based on the research results, is the inclusion of English in the third grade with more classes per week, thus supporting the suggestion already made by Jaekel et al. (2017), instead of just one class of English per week Kosovan first and second graders are exposed to (MEST, 2016). Such a limited exposure to English should not impose high expectations regardless of the pupils’ very young age (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

To conclude, the fact that only 1/3 of the parents and teachers who participated in this research agree with the decision of MEST to include English as an obligatory subject in the first grade may be seen as a lack of communication between them and the education authorities, or as a conscious decision of the latter to disregard the opinions of these very important stakeholders, but most importantly, it should serve as a reminder for the education authorities to change these practices in the future and involve all the stakeholders in the decision-making processes, thus providing the opportunity for feedback from all the relevant factors and avoiding the never-ending debates.

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