



Improving English as a foreign language proficiency in elementary schools: Exploring students' and parents' perceptions

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Studying English at elementary school plays a big role in the educational process. That is why it is necessary to pay due attention to this subject. Based on the goals set for the collection of information it was decided to conduct an empirical study, which was to survey schoolchildren and their parents' (legal representatives) perceptions towards studying English as a foreign language (EFL). Surveys were conducted among 150 primary students and 90 parents in Moscow, Russia and Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. The first survey was conducted to determine the students' attitude towards a foreign language. According to the results of both surveys, one of the main problems is lack of motivation from the part of schoolchildren, and incomplete awareness of the importance of the foreign language. In addition, one more problem may be the study overload and unengaging content delivery. Several suggestions were proposed: increasing interest in foreign languages, dosing the load, using of extracurricular activities to improve academic performance and using of additional materials.

Keywords: Primary school, English in primary school, primary education, English as a foreign language.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent English as a second language and learning English studies have recorded a negative tendency or a decline in academic environments among schoolchildren. It was noted that the marks received in the second language are lower than in other subjects. Additionally, ESL school attendance rates dropped sharply when they moved from one academic grade to another (Gwynne, Pareja, Ehrlich & Allensworth, 2012).

By approaching the second half of the 2010s, we reached an age when bilingual and multi-lingual skills are increasingly perceived as decisive for success in the globalized world (Zhilbayev, Moiseeva & Barsanova, 2018). Due to the fact that English is increasingly important for success in the 21st Century Global Competition, in recent decades many non-English-speaking countries have received widespread measures for closer acquaintance with this language for primary students (Ali, Hamid & Moni, 2011).

Any language policy is determined by the underlying motives, as well as the policy regarding the English language in education. Early English language education is believed to provide significant linguistic benefits that cannot be achieved by people who begin studying at an older age. At the heart of this idea lies the hypothesis of the critical period in mastering the language. According to this theory, the interval between two years and the age of puberty (about 11-13 years) is considered a critical period during which it is possible to acquire language skills similar to those of its native speakers (Butler, 2014).

It is supposed that early English language learning will facilitate the language acquisition process for children, which will enable them to achieve high and even close to native language proficiency (Zein, 2017).

There is also a socio-economic imperative that determines the formation of an education policy in English at elementary school level. English is important for accelerating academic progress, such as passing university entrance exams and receiving scholarships to study abroad (Tweed & Som, 2015).

English language education at elementary school level is associated with the growth of social mobility, which allows citizens to achieve global competitiveness in the 21st century. In long run, English will allow them to remain competitive in an increasingly internationalized economy (Song, 2011).

Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Elementary Schools serves the following purposes:

- the formation of basic English language skills in the field of spoken language, reading and writing so that students can communicate in English in schools and in a familiar social environment;
- providing students with basic knowledge of English in order to get an initial understanding of the country, people and culture of some English-speaking countries;
- creating a positive attitude towards the English language as well as a better understanding and love for the culture of your country through the study of English. In addition, the intellect, personality and method of teaching students will gradually develop (Thai, 2005).

Teachers are one of the most important factors for ensuring effective introduction of English into primary education, as they can make a major contribution to motivating children to study the subject. In addition, it is not easy to teach younger children. Teaching younger students a foreign language can be more difficult at the primary level than at a higher level, because of the greater dependence of children on the oral language (Cameron, 2003).

The teaching methods used in elementary schools also play an important role in the effective implementation of the English language. Unlike language learning programs suitable for adults, the teaching technique for young children has the following features:

- attention to the form of language and accuracy, and not fluency;
- emphasis on reading and writing skills from the very beginning;
- intensive use of rehearsal exercises and choral work of the whole class in order to help children learn the word or phrase perfectly;
- lack of attention and opportunities for more freely using the language and for communicative or creative purposes (Moon, 2005).

When making up curricula for elementary school students, it is worth remembering that younger students differ from adults in several aspects, in particular, on the level of development and literacy. That is, children of junior high school studying foreign languages in schools still have literacy skills in their native language, and experience difficulty of cognitive, physical, emotional and social growth. According to the development of literacy of children, teachers should be aware of the dependence of younger students on oral speech and provide the material of the second language in simple and understandable ways (McKay, 2006).

From the point of view of their cognitive growth, junior schoolchildren tend to embarrass the lessons that contain abstract concepts. In addition, strategies or methods commonly used in adult classes such as explicit explanation of grammar may be considered ineffective for younger students. Teachers also need to integrate artistic activities such as games, songs, drawing, storytelling, and linguistic content for the construction of pedagogy, corresponding to the peculiarities of the development of children in elementary school (Tokareva, Malysheva & Smirnova, 2019). In this sense, artistic elements are regarded as an important part of the education of junior schoolchildren (Brewster et al., 2002; Wright, 2009).

One of the problems of learning English can be related to the cognitive development of children. Scientists working in the field of language policy argue that a certain level of cognitive maturity is a prerequisite for successful learning. It is assumed that initial English language education does not benefit children in multilingual societies due to their cognitive immaturity. In

addition, young children may be embarrassed by the flow of language material. This language confusion does not lead to effective learning (Kaplan, Jr Baldauf & Kamwangamalu, 2011).

Thus, English language classes in elementary school have its own peculiarities, which may also entail certain difficulties. In this connection, the research objectives were formulated:

- conduct a survey among elementary school students to identify their attitude towards the English language;
- conduct a survey among parents of interviewed students;
- identify the main problems based on the obtained results;
- formulate possible solutions to the identified problems.

METHOD

Research design

Based on the goals set, it was decided to conduct a survey as an empirical study to collect the needed information. The study used a quantitative research methodology to collect and analyze the interpretations and values of the questionnaire.

Participants

Surveys were conducted among elementary school students studying English in Moscow, Russia and Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. This survey was conducted to determine the attitude of students towards learning English as a foreign language. In total, 150 schoolchildren from 7 schools participated in the survey.

A questionnaire was also organized for parents of elementary school pupils. Altogether 90 people attended. The questionnaire was anonymous.

The participant's selection criterion

Only primary school students, grades 2-4, were selected for participation in the survey, as this study examines the problem of academic achievement while studying English at the primary level. Hence, their age ranged from 8 to 11 years. With the help of homeroom teachers written consents were signed by parents (legal representatives) to get their approval on the participation of their children in the survey.

Research instruments

Two surveys were organized for the study. The first one was implemented on primary school students and consisted of seven questions. Since the primary students do not have a necessary knowledge of English to conduct the survey in it, it was conducted in their native languages – Russian and Arabic. Originally the survey was made in English and then given to the translators who translated it to the target languages for children. The credibility of the survey was checked using member checking techniques.

In order to minimize incorrect answers due to misunderstanding and due to the cognitive characteristics of children at this school age, surveys in all classes were conducted in the presence of adults. After distributing the survey to the students, the procedures and each question were read out and, if necessary, explained, then the students were given time to answer. The following were the questions included in the survey:

1. Do you think every person should know English? The first question was aimed at assessing whether the children were aware of the importance of learning a foreign language. Despite the fact that the age of the respondents (from 8 to 11 years old) is small enough, they can already assess the importance and necessity of that phenomenon.

2. Do you like to learn English? In this question, children were asked to express their attitude towards learning English. This question plays an important role, since sympathy for the subject directly affects motivation and, consequently, academic performance.

3. Can you describe the English lessons in your school as interesting? Another way to raise motivation and academic performance to the subject is his interesting teaching. In the third question, the children were asked to evaluate if the lessons in their school could be called interesting.

4. Do you think English is difficult? Next, students were asked to express their subjective opinion about whether English is difficult or not. Answers to this question will depend solely on the personal perception of each child.

5. Would you like to improve your English grade? According to the fifth question, it will also be possible to judge the motivation of children when learning English, since the desire to raise the grade will rather arise among those who are more interested in the subject.

6. Do you think you are given a lot of homework? In this question, children were also asked to give a subjective assessment of the amount of homework in English. However, when analyzing the answers to this question, it should be understood that the perception of the amount of homework may depend on many factors, including the interest in the subject and the child's academic progress.

7. Does your school have extra-curricular classes in English? The last question was aimed at finding out whether there are extracurricular classes in English in the participating schools.

In addition, during the study, the parents (legal representatives) of students were asked to fill in the second survey, which consisted of one question. This question was also answered with the support of homeroom teachers: with their help, parents (legal representatives) were given forms that they could fill out.

The parents' survey was regarded as an important part of the study, since during the elementary school education, relatives usually take the most active part in supporting the child education (they help with the homework, control its doing, etc.). That is why, by conducting a survey among parents (legal representatives), it will be possible to draw conclusions about possible problems that can affect the children performance in learning English.

The parents' survey consisted of the following question: "From your opinion, which factors can affect the child's progress in learning English as a foreign language?" This open question was designed to be answered in a free form in several sentences, to elicit more information about possible problems. After receiving all the questionnaires, the data were analyzed and structured, and the most frequent answers were highlighted. Both surveys were complementary in that both contributed to the collected data through triangulation of data collection instruments.

Research issues and restrictions

One of the main limitations of the study is that among schoolchildren only junior schoolchildren took part in the experiment, which does not indicate a problem on a larger scale. That is why a number of problems and difficulties that were identified in the study, as well as recommendations for solving them, can be more applicable only to this group of respondents. In addition, due to the cognitive characteristics of young children, the opinion expressed by them can be very subjective.

Further research can also be conducted on a wider scale. First of all, among middle and high school students, in order to trace whether the same factors affecting the academic performance of the English language persist when moving to other levels of education. Further, such research can be carried out in colleges and universities for students of non-linguistic specialties. Similar studies can also be carried out among citizens of other countries where English is also studied as a foreign language.

Data analysis

Survey data was processed using the STATISTICA software. This software, developed on the basis of Microsoft Windows, allows you to visualize the data in a statistical analysis. The size of the error is 2%, about 3 questionnaires were incorrectly filled (some respondents did not answer all the questions of the questionnaire or chose more than one answer).

RESULTS

First, the analysis of the survey conducted on the junior schoolchildren revealed the following:

The data on the first question turned out to be rather low, only 37% of students agreed that English is necessary for everyone. This suggests that students may not fully realize the importance of learning foreign languages, which may affect motivation and, consequently, academic performance. However, such data could have been obtained due to the age of the respondents, since at a younger age children are less likely to encounter foreign languages, and also be less interested in what is not part of their immediate environment.

On the next question, the data was slightly higher (56%). However, such an indicator can still not be considered favorable. It can also result from low interest and motivation. Remarkably, when analyzing the questionnaires in which students answered "yes", it was found that most often this option was found in second-grade students, less often in fourth-graders, see Figure (1).

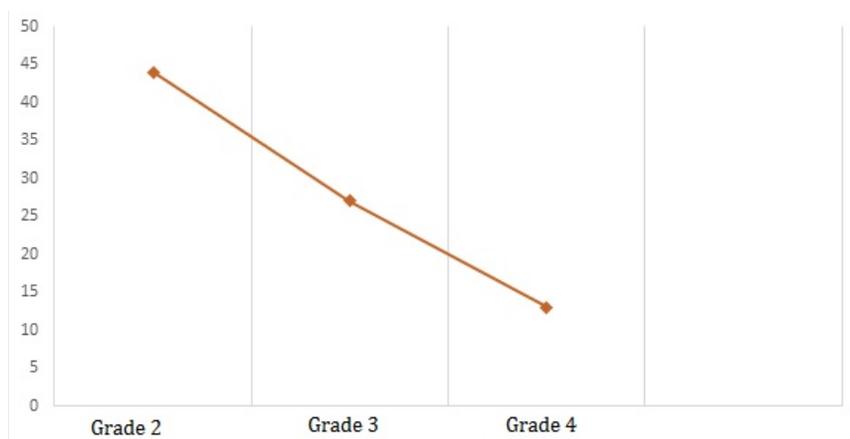


FIGURE 1. *Level of interest in the subject by classes*

Such results may be justified by several factors, the main of which may be the novelty of the subject. Since in the second grade, only the first year of English is taught, there is a greater possibility that children are more interested because it is something unfamiliar to them. In addition, the reduction of interest in the age range can be due to the fact that over the years, the educational material becomes more difficult, and the load - more. These factors can also affect the reduction of motivation and level of interest in the subject.

Not a very large percentage of respondents (54%) agreed that English lessons in their school were interesting. There may be several reasons for this. They can be related both to the structure of the lessons themselves, to the curriculum, and to the level of interest of students in the subject. In addition, it is worth remembering that the concept of "interesting" is quite subjective and may strongly depend on the personal perception of the child. What may seem interesting to some children may turn out to be uninteresting for others.

About half of the students (49%) noted that they considered the English language as difficult. This indicator cannot be considered high, which indicates that the reasons for low interest in the subject are not necessarily related to the problems of its mastering. Therefore, it is still possible to talk about the lack of awareness of the importance of foreign languages.

Most of the respondents (74%) expressed their desire to improve their English language proficiency. In this case, it is difficult to judge the reasons, because there is a very small probability that such a result is caused by an interest in the subject, as evidenced by the data of the previous questions.

66% of the interviewed children agreed that they are given a lot of English homework. This indicator is quite high, which makes it possible to consider overload as one of the reasons for the reduce of motivation. However, as in the case of assessing the interest of lessons, the children's opinion on this issue can be considered quite subjective. However, this factor should not be excluded.

Slightly more than half (52%) of the interviewed children reported that their schools have extra-curricular activities associated with foreign languages. This indicator can be considered rather positive, as it indicates that a sufficiently large proportion of children have the opportunity to study and practice English outside of the classroom.

Next was the analysis of the survey for parents. Since the answers were given in free form, they were analyzed, the most frequent ones were identified and summarized for more convenient presentation of data. The results were presented in Figure (2).

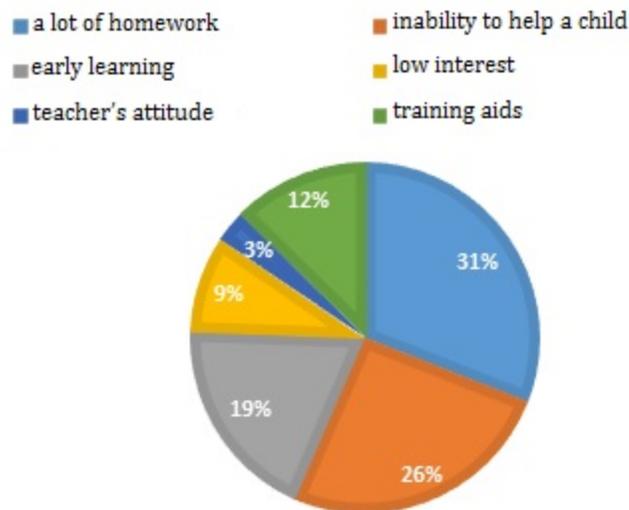


FIGURE 2. Possible reasons indicated by parents for the decline of English language proficiency

As can be seen from the Fig. 2, the most common answer (31%) is "a lot of homework". This confirms the results of the survey of children, and thus it can be concluded that excessive load can indeed be one of the reasons for the decline in academic performance.

The next in frequency (26%) was the reason of "the inability to help the child." Quite a large number of parents surveyed indicated that they could not fully help a child with homework, as they themselves had studied another language (German or French) during their school years. Lack of support, especially in the initial stages of language learning, can negatively affect its learning and progress.

Another common answer was "early learning". Many parents reported that the practice of learning English from the second grade was wrong, as the children did not study their native

language enough. However, this item is difficult to consider as representative, since parents may not realize that learning languages is better at an earlier age.

The most unpopular variant of the answer was the "teacher's attitude". This suggests that teachers could be considered as a reason for the decline in primary school students' achievement, with the exception of rare particular cases.

Thus, according to the results of both surveys, one can conclude that one of the main problems is lack of motivation from the part of schoolchildren, incomplete awareness of the importance of the foreign language. In addition, one more problem may be the overload and unengaging content delivery.

Increasing interest in foreign languages

One of the main guarantors of higher academic performance is the interest in the subject. Therefore, in order to improve the academic performance of a foreign language, it is necessary to explain its importance to life. Since in this case it is about elementary school students, it is necessary to do this, based on the topics close to the children of the corresponding age. For example, you can motivate them by watching small cartoons in English, texts about favorite foreign characters, etc. It will prove to children that a foreign language may also be applicable to their daily interests.

Dosing of load

One of the reasons for the decline in academic performance can be an overload, causing fatigue in children and, consequently, a loss of interest in the subject. In order to avoid this, it is necessary to revise the English language curriculum in elementary school and perhaps, based on the conclusions drawn, to change them in favor of reducing the load according to the age of the children.

Use of extracurricular activities

Since extra-curricular activities are now considered as an important and vital part of the curriculum in any school, it must be used to improve the students' progress in foreign languages. Unlike lessons where classes are regulated by requirements and an assessment system, another approach can be used in extra-curricular activities. For example, the study of a language or certain topics that cause pupils difficulty may take place in a game form, which will contribute not only to relaxation and team building, but also to a more relaxed assimilation of the language.

Use of additional materials

Another way to improve the academic performance is through the use of additional materials. This could be through handouts containing exercises, information in charts, new words. Also, with sufficient technological support from the school, an interactive whiteboard with English language learning applications can be used in the classroom. One more way to increase interest and achievement can be the use of presentations, which will contain theoretical information and tasks for its development. This will allow children to absorb the material in a less formal setting, which can have a positive impact on their academic performance.

DISCUSSION

Learning a foreign language in elementary school is an important topic in the field of education, which is the reason why various studies are being conducted on this subject. One of them took place in 2018 (Nguyen, 2018) and was aimed at studying the situation with the formation of a curriculum in accordance with the age of the students. The data for this study were collected from two sources - semi structured interviews and observations in the classroom. During the one-hour interview, participants were asked to talk about their experiences in teaching, especially about teaching practice and creativity that is appropriate for the age they created in primary schools. With

the consent of the teachers, all interviews were recorded for further analysis. Despite the fact that the participants were fluent in English, the language of the interview was Vietnamese, so teachers could feel more confident in expressing their ideas using their native language (Nguyen, 2018).

Combined with the interview, classroom observation was an important source of data for the study. A significant advantage of observations in educational research is the ability to collect live data from natural social situations. Since observation in qualitative research is unstructured and natural, its role as the data collection tool is outstanding (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

All participants were observed during a 40-minute lesson (duration of one training period in elementary schools in Vietnam). Although it was not necessary to strictly follow a predetermined protocol, observation guidelines were developed from participant surveys to focus on the details that supported the main research topics. More specifically, the guidelines helped the researcher to identify characteristics identified by participants during interviews, such as artistic activities, language use, and child-friendly practices. Audio recording of some activities reflecting age creativity in practice was conducted (Punch, 2009).

The data gathered during the interviews indicate that teachers are determined to attract students to English as much as possible. Taking into account the cognitive and language development of children, the English language used in the initial classes should be simple in terms of structure and vocabulary (short sentences and familiar words). When teaching children to participate in-group and pair work, games or just simple exercises in textbooks, it should always be borne in mind that instructions and explanations in English should be clear and easily understood by students (McKay, 2006; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011).

The inclusion of artistic components into practice has also led teachers to significant discoveries in the field of intellectual abilities of students. As a result, students had the opportunity to develop potential talents in art in addition to the main purpose of learning English (Ngara & Porath, 2014).

In addition, classroom situations need to be modeled in order to allow students to use what they learn today at school for future communicative and social goals. In addition, child-friendly speech practices in real-world situations can be expanded beyond the classroom (Freeman, 2016).

Another study took place in 2014, it was related to the writing skills of children studying English as a foreign language. The following research question was formulated: what is the English language proficiency of students attending a former elementary school of model C located in rural areas. The research issue was studied by studying the English language proficiency of all students in the Model C elementary school in the countryside (Manyike, 2014).

The sample consisted of all students who are native speakers of the Xitsonga language (one of the indigenous languages of South Africa) in one selected rural primary school in the province of Limpopo. A total of thirty-one students were interviewed. All these students almost did not deal with English outside the school and outside of official lessons. (Christie, 2008).

The data was collected using the written English test (middle level) written by the Research Council for Humanities. This is a standardized test designed to determine the level of English language proficiency at the intermediate stage of training. The test consisted of two intermediate tests (Chisholm, 2005).

A total of 96.8% of students had grades above 40% in both interim tests. Thus, students' performance was the same in the two intermediate tests. The form of both histograms and boxed charts showed a negative distortion of the data. Both rectangles had emissions on the left, and the spelling and syntax block had an extreme release. In terms of variability, spelling and syntax have slightly less variability - 19.1%, while the spelling of sentences and creative writing have a coefficient of variation of 20%. The variability in the two intermediate tests, therefore, is almost the same (Gauntlett, 2011).

The results of this study show excellent English language skills for students studying second language in a rural school with low socioeconomic education. Their good results can be explained by

the bilingual language policy of the school. Students participating in this study have studied in their native language during the first three years of schooling and continue to learn it. Considering that most second language learners cannot obtain academic English proficiency to cope with the academic context, the results of this study show how the school context can be used to provide academic success to learners of the second language (Pennycook, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted and the literature reviewed, it can be concluded that the study of English in elementary school plays a large role in the educational process. That is why it is necessary to pay due attention to this subject.

Based on the goals, for the collection of information, it was decided to conduct an empirical study, which consisted of a survey of students and their parents. Surveys were conducted among elementary school students studying English. This survey was conducted to determine the students' attitude to a foreign language. In total, 150 schoolchildren participated in the survey. Another survey was conducted among parents (legal representatives) of students to determine what problems they see in this area.

According to the results of both surveys, it was found that one of the main problems is the lack of motivation on the part of students, incomplete awareness of the importance of a foreign language. In addition, one more problem may be the overload and lesson prepared not interesting enough. Several ways of solving the problem were proposed.

One of the main guarantors of higher academic performance is the interest in the subject. Therefore, in order to improve the academic performance of a foreign language, it is necessary to explain its importance to life. That is why it is necessary to show to children that a foreign language may be applicable to their daily interests. One of the reasons for the decline in academic performance may be an overload, which causes fatigue in children and, consequently, entails a loss of interest in the subject. In order to avoid this - it is necessary to revise the curricula in English in elementary school and, perhaps, on the basis of the conclusions made, change them in favor of reducing the load in accordance with the age of the children. A different approach may be taken to improve your English language performance in extracurricular activities. For example, learning a language or certain topics that cause pupils difficulty may take place in a playful way. Another way to improve your academic performance is through the use of additional materials.

The results of this article can be used for further research, for example, to carry it out in a broader perspective. In addition, the recommendations presented in the article can be used by schools to improve the English language elementary school students' performance.

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QUESTIONNAIRE SAMPLE

Table 1. Survey of schoolchildren

Question

Options for the answer

1. What do you think, should everyone know English?

Yes

No

2. Do you like to learn English?

Yes

No

3. Can you say that the English lessons in your school are interesting?

Yes

No

4. Do you think English is difficult?

Yes

No

5. Would you like to improve your English grade?

Yes

No