

FROM HERITAGE TO HYBRID: THE USE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN TETOVO

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how elementary school children aged 6-10 see and perceive the English language. The aim is to see how English impacts their everyday life, through school, media and online platforms, which play a significant role in the sense of identity of younger generations. The data were collected through an online survey that was sent to parents, in order to obtain consent from them regarding their child's participation in this survey. There were 10 easy questions that helped the kids understand and be able to give honest answers naturally. The results showed that the majority of the children have a highly positive approach to English language, and use it in different situations, at school, at home and online.

A good part of them also combine their mother tongue with English, which leads them to a hybrid language identity. They see English as entertaining, which gives them a special feeling, especially being able to communicate differently from their parents. The aim of the paper is to show how the use of English among little children represents the movement from a traditional to a hybrid identity, where English language does not replace Albanian, but it coexists with it.

Keywords: hybrid language, bilingual, identity, English.

1. Introduction

Language In the era of globalization and international communication, the English language has gained a significant role as the international language of communication and is widely used by all ages, including school kids. Studies show that exposing, being exposed to English language does not happen only in formal educational environments, but also in online media, games, TV, and social platforms, which impacts its acquisition from a very early age. This situation has led to cultivating a new hybrid language identity where English is mixed with mother tongue in the communication of kids on a daily basis.

A very often phenomenon which is mutual for bilingual and multilingual communities, is code mixing, including elements from two languages in the same expression. This seems like a reflection of language competence and a natural process of language acquisition. Related to this, literature in psycholinguistics has identified that kids that are exposed to different languages, including English, develop different models of language use and mix languages for interpersonal communication (Byers, Heinlein, et al. 2022).

From a social and cultural point of view, Balkan is a multilingual place, where contacts between languages have been traditionally present for centuries in a row. The specific impact

of English among the Albanian community in the Balkans has gained attention in linguistic research, especially in the use of Anglicisms and lexical borrowings from an early age. (Pllana, S., & Breznica, A. P., 2017). In the context of Tetovo, where two or more languages coexist together, elementary school kids, face an environment where English happens not only in the class, but also through contact with their friends.

This situation raises an important question: How often do kids use English in their daily life, in which situations do they listen and use English, and does age play a role in the frequency of use and mixing of English and Albanian? So these issues shape the basic empirical part of this study. The aim of this research is to see the use and perception of English language among elementary school kids in Tetovo, analyzing the main statistics of using English. This analysis helps us see that English, as a global language, shapes the linguistic identities of little kids in a multilingual context as the Balkans. Before 2007-2008, English in the Republic of Macedonia was mostly taught from fourth and fifth grade.

However, after the big changes in the law for education, English language was incorporated as a course from first grade that came along with the ninth year elementary school system (Lazarova-Nikovska, 2019). So, kids are coming in contact with English language from their first grade throughout their whole life, basically. However, as years pass, little kids are already able to speak English before they begin elementary school. This is because they are, most of the time, exposed to English language through digital media, YouTube, songs, games, and phones. In 2015, Eurostat published a report which said that 98.2 percent of elementary school kids in Macedonia spoke English, which was the highest percentage ever met in this country.

2. Literature review

English being spread in almost every country increases the number of bilinguals. Many studies show that even parents want to push bilingualism among their kids. (Lee, M., et al., 2015) conducted a research about the preferences of parents related to bilingualism of their kids. They identified the factors that play a role in parents' decisions and strategies used in promoting bilingualism. The researchers organized focus groups with parents of kids aged 3-7, bilinguals of Spanish and English. These sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the analysis showed that parents want their kids to be bilingual.

They also stated that the outcomes of bilingualism include better career prospects and keep the heritage culture and mother tongue too. The decision of parents for bilingual education was impacted by family members, schools, and previous experiences of other parents. Kids were able to also perform better at school by being bilingual too. As mentioned in the introduction, multilingualism and bilingualism have been present in the Balkans for a long time. In Kosovo for example, after the war of 1999, young people, Albanians and Serbians have widely been exposed to English language (Lohaj, 2018).

Later, the spread of English happened in other countries too. In North Macedonia, studies show that the exposure to English in this country is consistent and one-sided, and creates room for extreme use of anglicisms especially among the youth (Celevska, I., & Naumoska-Sarakinska, B, 2023). The biggest influence comes from social media, followed by technology and the music industry (Kirova and Petkovska, 2013). When we talk about the creation of new generation of bilinguals, we must consider teachers too, because they are the one that have challenges with their students.

A study conducted on teachers' perceptions from 1st to 5th grade in Kosovo related to the role of early exposure to English language on the development of the mother tongue showed that early exposure to English can bring benefits, cognitive and academic ones, like flexibility of thoughts, metalinguistic awareness, and executive functions, but it can also play a negative role in the skills of children in the first years of learning their mother tongue at school.

The results also show that a considerable number of students have difficulties in using correct alphabet, grammatical rules, reading and writing in their mother tongue, in this case Albanian. Many students mix English and Albanian during their communication, which can also play a role in their self-confidence and participation in the class. Moreover, these difficulties are related to the performance in other subjects, claiming that basic linguistic knowledge is the key to academic success. Osnanaj-Spahiu, S., and Hasani, D. (2024). point out the importance of implementing strategies in differentiated teaching, using helpful materials, and creating groups for cooperative learning in order to support the students.

3. Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach to analyze the English language use among elementary school kids in Tetovo, aged 6 to 10 years old. The data were collected via online questionnaire, which included multiple choice questions and questions related to the frequency of English language use in different situations. The participants in the study were 55 elementary school kids, chosen through convenience sampling.

The data were analyzed through statistical methods using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, in order to analyze the relationship between the variables. Since the age of the kids is very young, we respected the main ethical considerations in this research, taking part was voluntarily and the data were anonymous and confidential through the parents. So, the links were sent via phone numbers to the parents, and then they read the questions to their kids and answered the questions without any pressure or inconvenience for the participants.

4. Results and discussions

The majority of the respondents were of age 6 (38.2%), followed by 29.1 % aged 9, whereas children aged 7,8 and 10 were all less than 15 % each, and other descriptive statistics are shown below.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for the key variables in the research

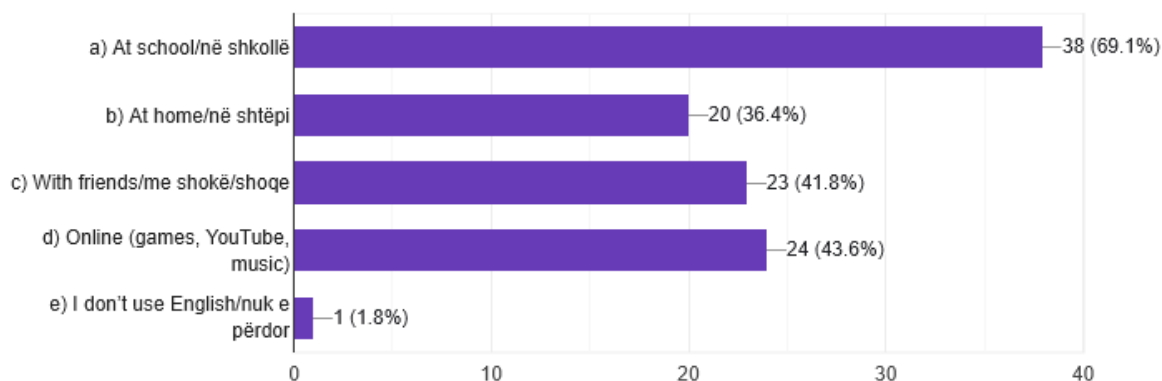
Variable	N	Mean	SD
Age	55	7.51	1.40
Like learning English	54	2.76	0.51
Feeling special when using English	46	2.17	0.74
Mixing English and Albanian	55	1.82	0.55
Number of English words	55	3.78	0.53
Context where English is used	55	6.13	2.76
English is important	55	2.76	0.54

From this table, we see that with a mean ($M=2.76$) and $SD=1.40$, students have a very positive approach toward learning English. In addition, with a $M=2.76$ and $SD=0.51$, we see that even at this early age students know that English is important and they recognize the value of this global language. The variable of mixing English and mother tongue has a lower mean value ($M=1.82$) and $SD=0.55$, which suggests that student do this sometimes, not the whole time.

In the question, *Do you like using English?* The vast majority, 78.2% answered Yes, followed by 16.4 % who chose yes, *sometimes* as an answer and only a small percentage chose

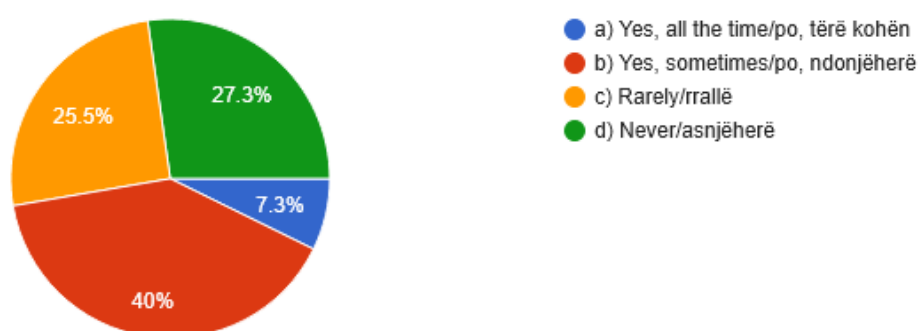
no as an answer. The figure below shows students' answers on when they use English, and the majority of them say at school, and the second most voted answer is Online (games, YouTube, music), followed by the option with friends and at home (20%). These results show that this is some kind of universal, because the answers align with other studies ((Kirova and Petkovska, 2013; Imaniah, I. & Zakky, A., 2020).

Figure 1
When do you use English?



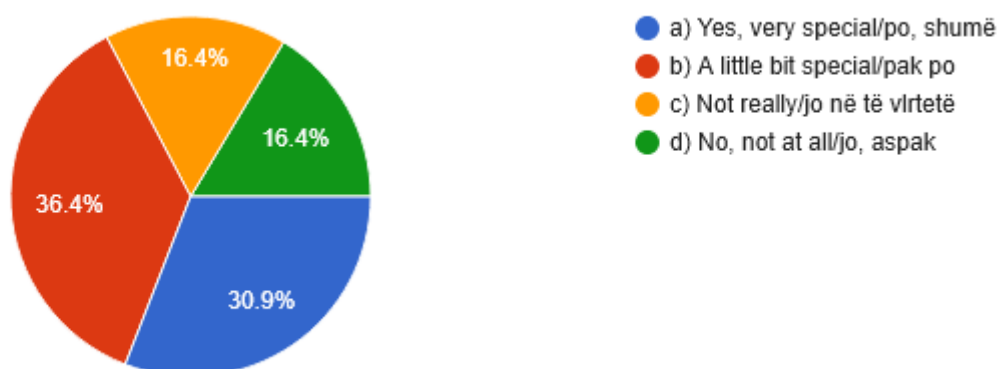
A subject of a few studies has been mixing languages while speaking, and this is also known as code mixing. Since it is noticed among young learners, and adults sometimes (Yanti, 2013) we included a question which aims to see if they are aware of mixing two languages. The results (as shown in Figure 2) say that students of early ages believe they sometimes mix English with their language, which can be true, but in many situations, they only know the English word for a certain thing and are not aware that they are using an English word instead of the Albanian equivalent.

Figure 2
Do you ever mix English and your language when you talk?



There are a few emotions that are mostly researched when it comes to emotions and feelings when learning a language. The most researched ones are anxiety and enjoyment (Coşkun & Yüksel, 2022) whereas the least ones are subjective happiness and self-pride (Liu, M., & Liu, J., 2024). The results shown below (see figure 3) tell us that school children (6-10) do feel special, of course, some have chosen *Very special* (30.9%) and some others *a little bit special* (36.4 %)

Figure 3
Do you think speaking English makes you feel different or special?



4. Conclusions

The results of this study show that elementary school kids in Tetovo have a very positive approach towards the English language and use it in different contexts of their everyday life. The majority of the respondents reported that they listen to English via digital media, music, online content, gaming, which shows the impact of globalization and technology in linguistic development of kids. Moreover, statistical analysis suggests that there is a correlation between age and language mixing or code mixing, showing that the process of language development in this period is accompanied with different interactive forms between mother tongue and English. In general, these findings support the idea that children in this context are developing a new language, a hybrid language identity where English does not substitute the mother tongue, but functions as a new layer of communication in a more and more global environment.

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