

Book Review

Language, school and society: The status of German in Hungarian public education

Katalin Markovics¹

Recommended citation:

Markovics, K. (2025). Language, school and society: The status of German in Hungarian public education [Review of the book *Kik és miért tanulnak németet az érettségít adó képzésekben?* [Who and why do the study German in the programs with secondary school leaving exam?], by K. Sebastyén]. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 7(2), 159–163. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cejr/2024/7/2/16589>

Bibliography of the reviewed book: Sebastyén, K. (2023). *Kik és miért tanulnak németet az érettségít adó képzésekben?* [Who and why do the study German in the programs with secondary school leaving exam?]. Debrecen University Press.

Introduction

Krisztina Sebastyén's monograph draws attention to a less frequently examined yet relevant area of foreign language learning in Hungary. The central question of the book, as clearly indicated by its title, is which factors influence the choice of German, the language most commonly studied as a second foreign language in Hungary, within secondary school programmes that lead to the school-leaving examination.

This question is best understood in the context of both international and Hungarian research on language choice. Internationally, English occupies a particularly prominent position, due in part to its role as a global lingua franca and to its central function in communication among speakers of different first languages, as well as in education, academic discourse, and economic exchange (Jenkins & Morán Panero, 2025; Seidlhofer et al., 2006). At the same time, language learning is not confined to a single tongue: choices are shaped not only by economic incentives and cost-benefit considerations (Ginsburgh & Weber, 2020), but also by broader social, cultural, and ideological factors (Duff, 2017). Evidence from an empirical study of German learners further underlines the diversity of motivations: while some approach language learning as an investment in human capital with expected economic returns, others are driven by personal, cultural, or family-related reasons, reflecting more consumption-oriented motivations (Huber et al., 2022).

These broader tendencies are also evident in the Hungarian context, although they are mediated by specific social and institutional conditions. Research in Hungary shows that language choice and learner motivation cannot be understood solely as matters of individual preference; rather, they are shaped by social and institutional influences (Nikolov, 2003; Dörnyei et al., 2006). Empirical findings consistently point to the dominance of English: it is associated with the most positive attitudes, typically attracts the highest levels of motivation, and is generally prioritised in language choice (Nikolov, 2003; Dörnyei et al., 2006; Csizér & Lukács, 2010). This dominance partly reflects the interaction between motivations linked to different foreign languages, which often work in favour of English while potentially diminishing motivation for others (Csizér & Lukács, 2010). It is also connected to the fact that English is not only present in formal schooling but also widely encountered in out-of-school contexts, increasing learners' exposure to the language (Blair et al., 2025). At the same time, clear social patterns can be observed: family background and the structure of the education system play a key role in shaping which languages become salient in students' choices (Nikolov, 2003).

Against this backdrop, Sebastyén's volume can be situated within a broader body of international and Hungarian research that approaches language choice as socially and institutionally embedded. Its main contribution lies in its empirical focus on the Hungarian public education context, highlighting the role of social background, the structure of the school system, and the range of available languages in shaping language choice.

¹ University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary; markovics.kata820810@gmail.com

Review

In the introductory section of the book, the author situates the study within a broader European and a narrower national context, emphasizing that the promotion of multilingualism is one of the European Union's key objectives, yet one that is not realized to the same extent in all member states. However, language proficiency, or the lack thereof, does not appear solely as an issue of educational policy, but can also be interpreted as a complex social phenomenon, since it has a long-term impact on individuals' social mobility and labour market prospects. In Hungary, the level of foreign language proficiency and the proportion of people speaking more than one language fall below the EU average.

In the continuation of the introductory unit, the author reviews the antecedents of research into language choice and motivation for language learning. The work presents a range of international and domestic studies that focus on the reasons underlying language choice and analyse the effectiveness of language learning from various perspectives. The author surveys psychologically oriented motivation research as well as sociologically informed investigations and analyses that focus on the effectiveness and performance of formal education. By embedding the topic of the present research in this context, Sebastyén concludes that the phenomena of language learning and language choice cannot be explained by a single factor and cannot be linked to only one academic discipline: the issue can be interpreted as the combined effect of complex social and pedagogical influences.

The closing unit of the paragraph establishes the interpretative frameworks for the later chapters by introducing the key concepts of the research. The author distinguishes between the definitions of language acquisition and language learning, and also provides a precise description of the concepts of the mother tongue, the first foreign language, and the second foreign language. With regard to the German language, she notes that in Hungarian public education it often appears as a second foreign language, which provides learners with an additional linguistic step. Further important concepts include family background, motivation, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Following the broader language policy and research-theoretical frameworks, the second chapter presents the pedagogical and educational policy antecedents of German language education in Hungary, thereby laying the foundation for the volume's later empirical investigations. While exploring the institutional and curriculum-policy regulatory factors that have shaped the current position of the German language in Hungarian public education, the author draws attention to an important contradiction: although German has long-standing traditions in Hungary, owing to the country's German minority and centuries-long political and cultural ties, its role has receded in recent decades alongside the dominance of the English language. The number of learners of German shows a sustained decline, and this phenomenon is not solely rooted in language pedagogy; motivation for language choice and language learning is also related to social mobility, the labour market, and the reconfiguration of educational policy priorities.

In discussing minority education, the author also addresses the relationship between assimilation and institutionalized German language learning. She notes that today German most often appears as a foreign language for learners even within minority institutions.

The chapter details the exit language proficiency levels aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and also highlights the fact that different types of institutions significantly influence the language competencies attainable by learners.

In reviewing educational policy regulations, the author presents the curricular and legal frameworks governing foreign language education. The analysis shows that although the regulatory environment simultaneously seeks standardization and differentiation, these efforts do not in all cases lead to increased effectiveness.

Sebastyén highlights that the success of language teaching is also critically influenced by language teachers, including their methods and pedagogical approach. In the closing section of the chapter, the author reviews the main methodological trends in foreign language teaching, primarily from the perspective of how these approaches may contribute to achieving the communicative language competence expected in the twenty-first century. Alongside teaching methods, she also emphasizes the importance of another key area of teachers' work: the selection of appropriate forms of assessment.

The third chapter of the volume provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the factors that determine learners' foreign language choices and influence the effectiveness of language learning. In this section, the author deliberately moves beyond explanations limited to individual preferences and learners' abilities, and interprets the phenomena discussed above within the interrelated domains of social, motivational, and pedagogical factors. The first structural unit of the chapter examines the role of learners'

sociocultural and socioeconomic background in language learning. Drawing on the capital theories of classical and contemporary scholars, Krisztina Sebestyén details how parents' level of education, families' cultural resources, and a learning-supportive home environment can influence individuals' attitudes toward foreign language learning and the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. The issue of effectiveness is a complex problem, as it is also linked to learners' social position and future prospects. The question of language choice, which indirectly affects effectiveness, is also related to learners' place of residence, particularly in terms of settlement type and the range of foreign languages available in the given educational institution.

Subchapter 3.2 places motivational factors under scrutiny. Sebestyén emphasizes the interactions between the mother tongue and the foreign languages learned, and highlights that learning an additional foreign language is never an isolated process: learners' prior linguistic experiences influence the acquisition of a new foreign language. The author conceptualizes motivation not as a static phenomenon but as a dynamic process shaped by individual experiences and goals, institutional expectations, and the social prestige and perception of the foreign language being learned. The chapter also points out that German is often chosen for instrumental reasons – such as employment opportunities or plans for further education – although language choice intentions are to a large extent also determined by learners' social background. In discussing the factors influencing language learning, the author devotes a separate subsection to the role of language teachers. Teachers' attitudes, professional preparedness, applied pedagogical methods, reflective practice, motivation, and openness to expanding their professional knowledge, all naturally influenced by the institutional environment, play a key role in the quality of the teaching-learning process.

The fourth chapter of the book approaches the effectiveness of foreign language learning in Hungarian public education from the perspective of institutionalized output indicators: the subsections focus on participation in academic competitions, the number of candidates taking language examinations, and the results of the two-tier school-leaving examinations, primarily through a comparison of English data with that of German.

With regard to academic competitions, the author notes that while participation rates related to the English language show an increasing trend over the longer term, in the case of German, stagnation or decline can be observed. In Sebestyén's interpretation, this phenomenon cannot be attributed solely to learners' individual interests, but is also linked to the incentive mechanisms of the institutional and social environment. Participation in competitions presupposes additional effort and teacher support, which tends to become established practice primarily in educational institutions where language proficiency is connected to long-term mobility goals.

Data related to language examinations further nuance the picture of learners studying German and/or English. Although the language examination is a form of assessment that extends beyond the framework of public education and is formally independent of it, it remains a popular type of examination among language learners. A significantly higher proportion of learners take language examinations in English than in German, which can be explained on the one hand by the global expansion of English and on the other by the fact that concrete, instrumental goals are more frequently associated with this language. Regarding English, more candidates take language examinations at both the intermediate and advanced levels. Among learners of German, by contrast, passing an intermediate-level language examination is the most common goal. The number of German test-takers falls considerably short of those taking examinations in English.

Subchapter 4.3 of the volume focuses on presenting the two-tier school-leaving examination system and the nationwide results of the German school-leaving examination. Sebestyén points out that effectiveness is not an isolated category in this respect either; student performance should be interpreted within the context of social embeddedness. As pertains to both German and English, the advanced school-leaving examination in a foreign language affects a relatively narrow group of students; even so, the number of students testing out in English remains higher. The author emphasizes that the interpretation of the results is significantly limited by the lack of available background variables; therefore, the data are primarily descriptive and orientational in nature and have less explanatory power.

Following the theoretical and literature reviews, the fifth chapter of the book presents the methodological framework of the empirical research. Subchapter 5.1 introduces the foreign language provision of upper secondary educational institutions awarding the school-leaving examination in the two counties under study, Hajdú-Bihar County and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, with particular attention to the institutional presence of English and German. The chapter examines the proportions in which English and German appear across different types of institutions, placing emphasis on the role of German as a first or second foreign language. The analysis highlights structural differences characteristic of the language education provision in the two counties examined, which may also influence learners' language choice opportunities and motivational patterns.

The data clearly indicate the dominance of English and, at the same time, the gradual loss of position of the German language.

Subchapter 5.2 presents the research questions and hypotheses. These are well-aligned with the educational sociological and language pedagogical theoretical frameworks outlined in the earlier chapters of the book and reflect the previously emphasized assumption that language choice and the effectiveness of language learning are not isolated phenomena, but can be interpreted through the interaction of individual and structural factors.

The following subchapter focuses on presenting the databases of the empirical research. The author describes the data sets based on student and teacher questionnaires in separate subsections, thereby creating an opportunity to compare perspectives related to different actors in education. The methodological transparency of the research is strengthened by a detailed description of the circumstances of data collection. The presentation of the applied methods is provided in the closing section of the chapter. In conducting the investigation, proceeding along the previously formulated research questions and hypotheses, the author relies on quantitative analytical procedures commonly used in empirical educational research.

As the first step in the author's empirical investigation, the sixth chapter of the volume examines the relationship between family background and foreign language choice. Chapter 6.1 analyses patterns of language choice at the primary school level. The dominance of English is already evident at the initial stage of language learning; however, the choice of German is not randomly distributed among learners. The author's findings show that parents with higher social status, particularly in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, more frequently choose German for their children, while in families of lower status a preference for English is more typical. The latter may be explained by factors such as institutional provision or perceptions linked to the competitiveness of the English language. Another important finding of the research is that when the decision is made by the learners themselves, English is preferred regardless of social background, indicating that the social perception and global character of English constitute a strong motivating force for young learners.

Chapter 6.2 places the examination of the relationship between secondary school choice and foreign language learning at its centre. The role of family background in this issue is indisputable, as the selective nature of the public education system does not reduce but rather stabilizes differences between social groups. In the case of students of lower status, the proximity of residence and the acquisition of vocational qualifications that can be easily and quickly utilized in the labour market predominate, whereas for students from more favourable family backgrounds, entry into an appropriate higher education institution and further study are more prominent considerations, and in this context the choice of German also appears as a priority. The author consistently interprets the findings within a social-theoretical framework. In this sense, learning German also represents a cultural and educational resource to which different social groups have unequal access.

Chapter 7 of the volume examines the relationship between academic achievement and goals related to language learning, with particular attention to how foreign language choice aligns with learners' future aspirations. Sebestyén analyses linguistic performance on the basis of multiple indicators and points out that results achieved in English and German are not merely the consequences of individual abilities, but are closely related to learners' social background and the institutional environment. In the second half of the chapter, plans for further education and labour market orientations become more prominent, clearly illustrating the differing motivations underlying language choice. While aspirations related to higher education are more common among learners of English, in the case of learners of German there is a stronger emphasis on the direct, practical usability of language skills. In the author's interpretation, these differences do not stem from the language chosen itself, but from the socially determined system of goals associated with language learning. The chapter thus highlights an important conclusion that language learning goals are socially and institutionally embedded, and cannot be interpreted as the result of language choice alone.

Chapter 8 of the volume directs attention to another key actor in foreign language education: the teacher. Based on empirical data, subchapter 8.1 illustrates how the professional work of foreign language teachers develops as a function of time spent in the teaching profession. According to the findings, teachers' professional priorities, methodological repertoires, and demand for further training display different patterns across career stages. Sebestyén's analysis also shows that these characteristics do not change in a linear manner with the progression of years spent in the profession; rather, each stage is associated with specific expectations and motivations, shaped by both the institutional environment and individual professional aspirations.

Subchapter 8.2 analyses the relationships between teachers' qualifications and the characteristics of their professional work, through a comparison of the responses of German and English teachers. Based on the results, qualification as an explanatory variable has only a limited differentiating effect. For most of the statements

examined, no substantial differences can be identified between the responses of German and English teachers, and the extent of significant differences is also limited. Both groups rate their own professional preparedness, students' classroom activity, and the frequency of foreign language use highly. The chapter also specifically notes that teachers show low levels of agreement with the statement that students' low level of language proficiency would justify the dominant use of the mother tongue in foreign language classes. This finding highlights the role of teaching practice and teacher attitudes in the choice of the language of instruction. Responses related to in-service training indicate that the professional development needs of German and English teachers follow broadly similar patterns: both groups primarily prefer training programmes that directly support their everyday professional practice. Differences between teachers of the two foreign languages appear mainly in the types of in-service training, while in both cases teachers' professional development is motivated by practical applicability.

The ninth chapter provides the summary of the volume, briefly reviewing and synthesizing the main findings and results of the preceding chapters. The author points out that learning German in programmes leading to the school-leaving examination is not merely a matter of individual preference, but is closely linked to learners' family background, school choice, and future plans. The summary also emphasizes the role of teachers, particularly the importance of professional preparedness and reflective teaching practice in the effectiveness of language learning. The chapter also indicates the limitations of the research: the study is based on data from two counties, and therefore the results are primarily interpretable within this context. The concluding section thus not only brings the research to a close, but also outlines directions for possible further studies.

Krisztina Sebestyén's latest book is a gap-filling contribution in that it examines the role of German as a foreign language in public education from an interdisciplinary perspective. Based on empirical data collection, the analysis goes beyond motivational and methodological aspects of language learning and demonstrates which social and institutional background factors influence language choice, as well as learners' achievements and goals in this field. At the same time, the empirical research is regionally delimited and cross-sectional in nature, which frames the interpretation of the conclusions drawn. I primarily recommend the volume to researchers engaged in the sociology of education and language pedagogy, as well as to professionals interested in the institutional conditions of foreign language education at the secondary school level, including school leaders and language teachers.

References

- Blair, E. C., De Wilde, V., & Verspoor, M. H. (2025). Linking extramural exposure and oral proficiency. *International Journal of Multilingual Education*, 26(3), 186–204. <https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2025.10438>
- Csizér, K., & Lukács, G. (2010). The comparative analysis of motivation, attitudes and selves: The case of English and German in Hungary. *System*, 38(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2009.12.001>
- Dörnyei, Z., Csizér, K., & Németh, N. (2006). Motivation, language attitudes and globalisation: A Hungarian perspective. *Teachers College, Columbia University, Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics*, 7(1).
- Duff, P. A. (2017). Commentary: Motivation for learning languages other than English in an English-dominant world. *The Modern Language Journal*, 101(3), 597–607. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12416>
- Ginsburgh, V., & Weber, S. (2020). The economics of language. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 58(2), 348–404. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20191316>
- Huber, M., Sommerfeld, A. M., & Uebelmesser, S. (2022). Language learning: Human capital investment or consumption? *Empirica*, 49, 897–948. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10663-022-09548-7>
- Jenkins, J., & Morán Panero, S. (2025). *Global Englishes: A resource book for students* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Nikolov, M. (2003). Angolul és németül tanuló diákok nyelvtanulási attitűdje és motivációja. *Iskolakultúra*, 13(8), 61–73.
- Sebestyén, K. (2023). *Kik és miért tanulnak németet az érettségit adó képzésekben?* Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó.
- Seidhofer, B., Breiteneder, A., & Pitzl, M.-L. (2006). English as a lingua franca in Europe: Challenges for applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026719050600002X>

Acknowledgement: We thank Johnathan Dabney for the English language editing.



© 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).