

Thematic Article

# Differences in Foreign Language Choice of Students from Different Social Backgrounds

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Recommended citation:

Sebestyén, K. (2021). Differences in Foreign Language Choice of Students from Different Social Backgrounds. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 3(2), 78–86. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cej/2021/3/2/9364>

## Abstract

According to previous research (e.g. Bernstein, 1971; Gogolin, 2014; Hegedűs et al., 2019), family background plays a decisive role in an individual's mother tongue acquisition and in learning foreign languages. In another study, parents with a high social background (54.0%) chose German for their children, and parents with a low social background (56.9%) chose English in primary school (Sebestyén, 2021). Based on this, in the study I examine what difference can be detected in the foreign language choice of high school students from different social backgrounds. In the study, I analyze the student data (890 people) of my database entitled “German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties” prepared in the 2018/2019 school year, during which I perform cross-tabulation and cluster analysis with the help of SPSS program. The database contains data on 11th grade high school and vocational high school students who studied German and / or English in high school. As the results, there are differences between the learned foreign languages among secondary school students according to family background. Among the clusters related to high school choice, those belonging to the “Higher Education Oriented Local” cluster are most interested in foreign languages, most German-speaking (74.0%) and English (89,0%) students tend to be in this cluster. Overall, the majority of respondents learn English, while students from higher social backgrounds (also) learn German.

*Keywords:* English; German; foreign language choice; social background; secondary education

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## Theoretical background

Nowadays, foreign languages and professional knowledge are important factors to finding a good job on the labour market. This is the reason that my research in this paper delves into what kind of factors influenced the foreign language and secondary school choice of high school and vocational high school students.

Choice of foreign language is influenced by several factors, such as the student's socio-cultural background, the parents' education, and the learner's prior language skills or opportunities for institutional language learning (Csapó, 2001; Sominé Hrebik, 2011). Parents' education influences an individual's acquisition of foreign language skills in several ways, because their studies can serve as a model for their children (Dörnyei, 2001; Heisig et al. 2020). For example, children with more educated parents are more motivated to learn more foreign languages on a higher level (Hermann-Brennecke, et al., 1993; Andor, 2000). Education of parents also determines the choice of foreign language, because the majority of children of higher-educated parents learn (also) English (Csapó, 2001; Nikolov et al., 2018). According to Nikolov and Csapó (2018), the popularity of the English language is due to the spread of the Internet and pop culture. However, according to other literature, in families with a high social background, parents prefer, during their children's primary school studies, they learn German (Table 1) (Sebestyén, 2021).

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**Table 1.** Connections between social background and foreign language choice in elementary school

<b>Social background</b>	<b>Foreign language choice</b>		<b>German</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Low</b>	<b>Chosen by pupil</b>	% in row	21.0%	78.5%	0.5%	100%
		Number of people	42	157	1	200
	<b>Chosen by parents</b>	% in row	41.7%	56.9%	1.4%	100%
		Number of people	30	41	1	72
	<b>Only this could be learned</b>	% in row	37.9%	61.5%	0.5%	100%
		Number of people	69	112	1	182
<b>High</b>	<b>Chosen by pupil</b>	% in row	20.4%	79.6%	0.0%	100%
		Number of people	21	82	0	103
	<b>Chosen by parents</b>	% in row	54.0%	44.0%	2.0%	100%
		Number of people	27	22	1	50
	<b>Only this could be learned</b>	% in row	18.1%	81.9%	0.0%	100%
		Number of people	15	68	0	83
<b>Total</b>	<b>Chosen by pupil</b>	% in row	20.8%	78.9%	0.3%	100%
		Number of people	63	239	1	303
	<b>Chosen by parents</b>	% in row	46.7%	51.6%	1.6%	100%
		Number of people	57	63	2	122
	<b>Only this could be learned</b>	% in row	31.7%	67.9%	0.4%	100%
		Number of people	84	180	1	265

Source: German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, 2018-2019; n=690; p=0.001 (people; %) (Sebestyén 2021: 199)

According to the data, parents from low social backgrounds chose English as their child's foreign language (56.9%), while parents from high social backgrounds preferred for their children to learn German (54.0%). Depending on the family background, there is also a difference due to the language's. 37.9% of students with low social status attended a school where only German could be learned compared to 18.1% of students with high social status. In the case of English, the situation is reversed, meaning the children from high social backgrounds usually studied English (81.9%), if there was no choice in primary school (Sebestyén, 2021).

Children from lower social status families generally prefer the institution closest to where they live because they cannot afford to choose otherwise (Schultz, 1998; Zolnay, 2018). For this reason, a given area influences children's educational opportunities by what institutions operate in that area (Kozma, 1973), what languages children have access to and what language learning methods are employed in these institutions, whether they can choose from foreign languages, etc. It is worth examining not only the institutions in the settlement of origin, but also those in its immediate vicinity, because, for example, the student may continue his / her secondary school studies in one of these settlements (Pusztai, 2004; Hegedűs, 2016).

Education of parents connected to their financial background also determines the individual's choice of school, because the children of better educated parents tend to graduate from high schools, while the children of less educated parents tend to graduate from vocational high schools (Hegedűs et al., 2019). The choice of school thus also has an effect on foreign language learning, because learning two foreign languages is compulsory in grammar schools, but only one language is obligatory in most cases in vocational high schools. In the latter institutions, the efficiency of (language) teaching is often lower, which may be due to, for example, students' prior knowledge, behavior, teacher fluctuations or their professional knowledge (Andor, 2000; Blossfeld et al., 2019; Hegedűs, 2020).

Based on the literature, the aim is to examine the relationship between foreign language choice and social background. For this, the following hypothesis is formulated: based on the social background, a difference can be found in the choice of foreign language in high school, and this difference also appears in the choice of secondary school.

### Database and methods

For the studies presented in my paper, I use the data of my questionnaire research entitled “German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties”. The research took place in 9 secondary schools of Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg in both the 2018 and 2019 school years. A total of 890 people filled out my questionnaires. They were 11th<sup>2</sup> grade high school students and vocational high school students<sup>3</sup>, who studied German and / or English. The language teachers of the students (100 people) also participated in the research, however, in this study only the student database is analyzed. Among the students, there were 440 women and 433 men, 445 people from Hajdú-Bihar county and 437 people from Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county. The explanation for the missing item numbers is that not all of the 890 people answered these demographic questions.

The SPSS program has been used for the research, during which two- and three-dimensional crosstab analyses were performed, and the significance was counted by Chi-square. To begin with, for crosstab analyses, two new variables were developed. One relates to the social background of the students: it was based on the highest educational attainment of the mother and father and the financial situation of the family. This new variable includes only the responses of students (740 people) who had data in all three original variables. I was to form a group with high social background (254 people) and a group with low social background (486 people). In the other variable, respondents were grouped according to the foreign languages they studied in high school: 157 people learned only German, 337 only English, and 396 people learned both languages.

For some of my studies, four clusters were formed from the 12 statements related to high school choices, to which, I used the command K-Means cluster in SPSS. The cluster centers can be found in Table 2.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Hungarian school system, the 11th grade is on the level ISCED 3.

<sup>3</sup> There were introduced vocational school/vocational high school/high school system and naming since school year 2016/2017 (2015. évi LXV. törvény) but it was changed since school year 2020/2021 as ascensional system and naming: vocational training school/technical institute/high school (2019. évi LXXX. törvény). I will use in my study the naming from the time of the data collection.

**Table 2.** Clusters related to high school choice

Statements related to high school choice	“Profession-oriented Commuter”	“Those Wishing to Break Out”	“Higher Education Oriented Locals”	“Survivors”
<b>This was the closest institution to my place of residence.</b>	1.38	2.46	3.88	3.18
<b>Going to school every day is easily resolvable.</b>	1.88	3.86	4.35	4.12
<b>Living in a dormitory is easily resolvable.</b>	1.49	3.06	2.62	1.42
<b>This is the only school in the neighbourhood where German can be found.</b>	1.28	1.12	2.79	1.18
<b>This is the only school in the neighbourhood where English can be found.</b>	1.20	1.13	3.69	1.41
<b>I’ve chosen this school because of its high educational level.</b>	3.89	3.35	3.94	2.52
<b>Higher education is easy to access from this school.</b>	3.73	3.67	3.93	2.70
<b>The knowledge acquired in the school is sought for in the labour market.</b>	3.59	3.71	3.41	2.18
<b>The students in need are aided by the school.</b>	1.57	3.92	3.43	1.97
<b>Nursing talented students and taking part in competitions have an important role in the school.</b>	2.40	4.05	3.79	2.70
<b>Helping the weaker students get caught up plays an important role in this school.</b>	1.79	3.59	3.22	2.21
<b>It is relatively easy to complete this secondary school.</b>	2.05	3.15	3.21	3.23
<b>Number of students (people)</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>255</b>

Source: German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, 2018-2019; n=889 (own editing)

(1) There are 233 students in the “Profession-oriented Commuter” cluster, for whom the high quality of knowledge acquired in secondary school, the demand for a qualification in the labor market and easy access to higher education are important. The students involved are more willing to travel for quality education. (2) There are 274 people in the “Those Wishing to Break Out” cluster, for whom the distance between high school and home is important, as many commute daily. It is important for them that the school supports students in need and nurtures talents too. (3) The cluster, “Higher Education Oriented Locals” contains 127 students. The geographical distance between the high school and their place of residence is important for them also, and they are day-scholars too. Moreover, easy access to higher education, talent development in secondary school, competition and language training are considered important. In view of all this, I assume that those belonging to this cluster may have the best academic results. (4) The “Survivors” cluster included 255 people, who were not motivated neither by the buy-appeal of the qualification at the labor market, nor by the entry into higher education. Also, while the social aspects were not relevant to them, the geographical proximity and easy completion of secondary school were.

## Results and discussion

Questions were asked about primary school foreign language learning in the questionnaires. At first, I examined the first and second foreign languages in primary school to see if respondents learn different languages in secondary school. My results show that a total of 75 (9%) of the 827 people learned another language in high school, which is interesting because, according to a nationally representative survey also conducted among 11th graders, this is only 3% (Albert et al. 2018). On the other hand, it should be noted that in my own study I only look for the difference between the group of students learning other foreign languages

(not German or English) in primary school and the group of vocational high school students, because I considered high school students to be a special group due to the two compulsory foreign languages. Based on the data, it can be stated that whoever can continue will, in secondary school, continue to learn the foreign language they started in primary school.

In the next step of the research, I examined whether respondents learn German, English, or both languages in secondary school. The family background of the students was also taken into account in the study (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Foreign language(s) studied in secondary school in relation to the social background of the students

<b>Social background</b>		<b>German</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>German and English</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Low</b>	% in row	18.1%	41.4%	40.5%	100%
	Number of people	88	201	197	486
<b>High</b>	% in row	15.7%	27.6%	56.7%	100%
	Number of people	40	70	144	254
<b>Total</b>	% in row	17.3%	36.6%	46.1%	100%
	Number of people	128	271	341	740

Source: German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, 2018-2019; n=740; p=0.000 (people; % (own editing)

The majority of students from low social backgrounds study only English (41.4%), although the difference compared to those learning two foreign languages is only 1.1%. Among those with high social backgrounds, two languages are learnt by the most (56.7%). Summarizing the data, however, it can be seen that the proportion of learners of just German and also German is significantly higher among those with a high social background (72.4%) than among those with a low social background (58.6%). In the case of English, the situation is reversed and the difference is smaller, because the proportion is 84.3% for those with a high social background and 81.9% for those with a low social background. Overall, German is also taught less than English in secondary school, and depending on the social background, the difference in previous research (Sebestyén 2021) is also related to secondary school language learning.

Next, I examined how students in each type of training were distributed based on their social background. The data are illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Distribution of students according to family background within training types

<b>Social background</b>		<b>High school</b>	<b>Vocational high school</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Low</b>	% in column	56.3%	73.7%	65.0%
	Number of people	202	266	468
<b>High</b>	% in column	43.7%	26.3%	35.0%
	Number of people	157	95	252
<b>Total</b>	% in column	100%	100%	100%
	Number of people	359	361	720

Source: German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, 2018-2019; n=720; p=0.000 (people; %) (own editing)

High school students (359 people) and vocational high school students (361 people) are almost equally distributed among the 720 students. In high school, the proportion of students with a higher social background is higher (43.7%) than in a vocational high school (26.3%), where students with a low social background are in the majority (73.7%). This confirms the findings in the theoretical literature that children of families with higher social status tend to study in high school (Hegedűs – Sebestyén 2019). The difference between the two social groups is more meaningful in the vocational high school (47.4%), while in high school the distribution between the students of the two social groups is almost 50-50 percent, therefore the difference between them is smaller (12.6%).

I examined the distribution of German-only and English-only students, as well as the students who learn German and English too, according to social background and types of training. The data are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Distribution of foreign languages studied in high school depending on social background and training type

<b>Social background</b>	<b>Training type</b>		<b>German</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>German and English</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Low</b>	<b>High school</b>	% in row	5.4%	12.4%	82.2%	100%
		Number of people	11	25	166	202
	<b>Vocational high school</b>	% in row	26.7%	64.7%	8.6%	100%
		Number of people	71	172	23	266
<b>High</b>	<b>High school</b>	% in row	5.7%	7.0%	87.3%	100%
		Number of people	9	11	137	157
	<b>Vocational high school</b>	% in row	32.6%	62.1%	5.3%	100%
		Number of people	31	59	5	95
<b>Total</b>		% in row	16.9%	37.1%	46.0%	100%
		Number of people	122	267	331	720

Source: German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, 2018-2019; n=720; p=0.000 (people; %) (own editing)

There is no meaningful difference between low and high social background of high school students in terms of percentage distribution according to the language they learn in secondary school. In both groups, most learn both German and English, followed by English-only and then German-only. Taken together, the proportion of learners who learn only German and also German is higher among students with a high social background (93.0%) than among students with a low social background (87.6%). There is a difference between the two social groups in terms of German and English learners, because the proportion of learners of both languages is higher among those with high social backgrounds (87.3%) than among those with low social backgrounds (82.2%). The proportion of English-only learners is higher in the latter group (12.4%) too compared to those with high social backgrounds (7.0%). I believe this is due to the fact that there may be different preferences for admission to higher education. It is possible that students with a high social background prepare for higher level exams and then take advanced school-leaving exams in other subjects, while it is assumed that students with a low social background try to use the language skills acquired in secondary school in the form of a school-leaving exam and / or a language exam.

A language exam can be an advantage in the long run because, for example, it is a requirement for graduation. At the time of data collection, Governmental Regulation 335/2014. (XII. 18.) was still operative, according to which a language exam would have been a condition for admission to higher education from 2020, so it is possible that more respondents had a language exam in the 11th grade.<sup>4</sup> However, supporting all this requires further investigation, which goes beyond the scope of the present study.

In the case of vocational high school students, it can be observed that there are fewer people with high social backgrounds who also learned German and English at the time of the survey (5.3%) and more students with high social background learn only German (32.6%) compared to the students with low social background (Table 5). Among those with low social backgrounds, the proportion of English-only students is higher (64.7%). Like primary school data (Sebestyén 2021), it can be stated that the children of higher social background families learn (also) German at a higher rate. With regard to vocational high school students with low social backgrounds who learn English and German too, I believe that they would like to choose a better training to get ahead, or to get access to the higher education system. At the same time, it is also possible that the proportion of students from vocational schools with a higher social background is similar, only they may have passed an advanced matriculation exam and / or language exam at the time of data collection, and therefore may have been exempted from attending classes.

Due to more detailed results I tried to deepen my study further. So I examined who learns what kinds of foreign languages in high school, using four clusters formed from variables related to secondary school choice. I first examined the proportion of students in each cluster from different social backgrounds (Table 6).

<sup>4</sup> The Governmental Regulation 261/2019. (XI. 14.) repeals the language exam to get into the higher education.

**Table 6.** Distribution of students by family background within the student clusters established in connection with the choice of secondary school

<b>Social background</b>		<b>“Profession-oriented Commuter”</b>	<b>“Those Wishing to Break Out”</b>	<b>“Higher Education Oriented Local”</b>	<b>“Survivor”</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Low</b>	% in column	56.3%	70.3%	70.4%	66.5%	65.6%
	Number of people	107	163	76	139	485
<b>High</b>	% in column	43.7%	29.7%	29.6%	33.5%	34.4%
	Number of people	83	69	32	70	254
<b>Total</b>	% in column	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	Number of people	190	232	108	209	739

Source: German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, 2018-2019; n=739; p=0.014 (people; %) (own editing)

In all four clusters, the proportion of students with low social backgrounds is higher, most being in the “Higher Education Oriented Locals” cluster (70.4%), followed by the “Those Wishing to Break Out” group (70.3%) with a tenth difference. The highest proportion of students with a high social status is among the “Profession-oriented Commuters” (43.7%). Based on the cluster characteristics, the members of “Higher Education Oriented Locals” are most interested in foreign languages, which may be due to the fact that the most important thing for them is to enter higher education, which presupposes upward social mobility. To ensure this, proven foreign language skills are required in the form of a language exam and / or a school-leaving exam.

I was also curious about the proportion of students within each cluster who studied only German, only English, and both German and English. The results are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Distribution of foreign languages learned in secondary school within the student clusters created in connection with the choice of secondary school

<b>Clusters</b>		<b>German</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>German and English</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>“Profession-oriented Commuter”</b>	% in row	22.3%	40.8%	36.9%	100%
	Number of people	52	95	86	233
<b>“Those Wishing to Break Out”</b>	% in row	16.1%	39.8%	44.2%	100%
	Number of people	44	109	121	274
<b>“Higher Education Oriented Local”</b>	% in row	11.0%	26.0%	63.0%	100%
	Number of people	14	33	80	127
<b>“Survivor”</b>	% in row	18.4%	38.8%	42.7%	100%
	Number of people	47	99	109	255
<b>Total</b>	% in row	17.7%	37.8%	44.5%	100%
	Number of people	157	336	396	889

Source: German learning and teaching in Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, 2018-2019; n=889; p=0.000 (people; %) (own editing)

The proportion of students studying only German (22.3%) and only English (40.8%) is highest in the “Profession-oriented Commuter” group. If German-only students and German and English learners are combined in each cluster, the proportion of German learners (59.2%) is the lowest in this “Profession-oriented Commuter” cluster compared to the values of the other clusters. The same is true for “Profession-oriented Commuters” who study only English, as well as German and English (77.7%). The high proportion of German-only learners in the cluster is in line with my previous findings that children of parents from high social backgrounds also learn German, but the other percentages refute this (see Table 7). Behind the results, I believe that there may be other preferences for high school choice. The highest overall rates for students learning German (74.0%) and English (89.0%) are found in the “Higher Education Oriented Locals” cluster. This may be due to the fact that out of the four clusters, this cluster has the highest proportion of high school students (72.0%; p=0.000), and most people learn two foreign languages here.

## Conclusion

In the study, I examined the relationship between social background and foreign language choice based on the responses of 890 high school and vocational high school students, who were studying 11th grade German and / or English. I hypothesized that I would find differences in secondary school foreign language choice based on social background and that this difference would also appear in choosing secondary school. The choice of learning a foreign language in primary school basically determines the language learnt in secondary school, because students will try to continue to learn the foreign language they had already started in primary school. Comparing the proportions of foreign languages studied in secondary school with the social background of the respondents, it can be seen that the proportion of students who learn German and also German with a higher social background is higher (72.4%) than those with a low social background (58.6%). This is different in the case of English, because the percentage is 84.3% among the students with high social background and 81.9% among the students with low social background.

Differences due to social background were also shown in the case of research by type of training. On the one hand, my research is in line with previous findings (Hegedűs et al., 2019) that students with higher social backgrounds preferably study in grammar schools. On the other hand, in connection with high school foreign language learning, it was also shown that students from higher social backgrounds (also) learn German.

Thus, my hypothesis was only partially confirmed because there is indeed a difference in the choice of foreign language in secondary school by students from different social backgrounds, however, this pattern can no longer be detected in all cases from the study of clusters related to choosing high school. Based on this, I believe that the foreign language to be learned is not the most determining factor in high school choice. The results of my study can help schools to offer professions to students and also consider the sorts of foreign languages they would provide according to the choice of students.

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