

**Zita Mažuolienė**

Vilnius University  
Institute of Foreign Languages  
Universiteto g. 5, LT-01513 Vilnius, Lietuva  
Tel: +370 676 468 82  
E-mail: zmaz@takas.lt  
Research interests: language didactics,  
language testing, bilingualism, young learners,  
ESP

**Ana Jankūnienė**

Vilnius University  
Institute of Foreign Languages  
Universiteto g. 5, LT-01513 Vilnius, Lietuva  
Tel: +370 685 002 45  
E-mail: ana.jankuniene@gmail.com  
Research interests: bilingualism, young  
learners, language didactics, CLIL

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**BILINGUALISM: CHOICES TO BE MADE**

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*The present research focuses on parents' decision to raise children with more than one language. Bilingualism in this article is considered to be not a result of environmental pressure or linguistic situation but the conscious choice made by the child's parents. The article concentrates on three main steps in planning the child's linguistic development: the choice of the language of pre-school (kindergarten) institution, the choice of the language of schooling, and parents' choice to include non-formal language learning activities into the child's daily routine. The research states that parents' attitude towards teaching their children a non-native language depends on the linguistic group they belong to and their educational background. The results of the research confirm that lack of methodological knowledge prevents parents from or limits their ability to teach the child. The survey also proves that children whose parents do teach them non-native languages are more motivated and more successful at school than their peers. Therefore, careful planning of the child's linguistic development is of primary importance and needs professional support from educational institutions.*

**KEY WORDS:** *bilingualism, mother tongue, non-native language, linguistic development*

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**Introduction**

People able to speak two or even more languages are not a new phenomenon in Lithuania (according to V. Šernas in 1979 85% of Lithuanians were fluent in both Lithuanian and Russian, and 11% of Poles were fluent in Polish, Lithuanian and Russian). Nowadays plurilingualism demonstrates particular importance in all walks of life. Every year pressure to learn more than one language at a very early age is being put on children, with reasons varying from family to family. The first, and probably the most compelling,

is the economic situation in Lithuania forcing people to emigrate taking their young children out of their native linguistic environment. The second, even those parents who do not intend to emigrate themselves realize the importance of learning foreign languages. Achieving high level of mastery improves the child's chances to enter a foreign educational institution after leaving school and/ or pursue a career abroad, what is nowadays widely considered to be a sign of success. The third factor to stimulate learning/ teaching languages at a young age

is national minority children whose parents are concerned with their performance later in life, thus choosing for their offsprings to attend Lithuanian medium educational institutions or doing their best to ensure they are being taught Lithuanian as a state language at high level.

In spite of recognizing the advantages of knowing more than one language in the adulthood, for decades parents and teachers have been very much concerned about negative consequences of introducing a child to more than one, native, language in the early childhood. It must be acknowledged that to enjoy the positive outcome of early-life bilingualism, if parents decide to bring up their child with more than one language, they need to start planning the child's linguistic development at a very early age. Young children are quick learners but they forget what they have learned quickly as well, unless constant support is provided (Cameron 2005). It is preferable to plan at least several steps ahead, choosing carefully the language of pre-school institution, the language of schooling and various language-learning activities outside formal education, such as use of languages at home or in the child's close environment, additional classes or the possible impact of modern technologies.

In monolingual families situations vary: on the one hand parents want their children to learn languages, on the other hand, the prejudice towards mixing different tongues is very strong among certain groups of parents, while others cannot plan their child's linguistic development successfully due to the lack of knowledge how to teach and/or insufficient knowledge of the target language. To examine the policies that parents adhere to in their children's education a

research was carried out in monolingual families and schools with different teaching languages in Vilnius. The aim of the article is to present the results of the research with the focus on the choices primary school students' parents make about the language of schooling for their children and their motives in preferring specific ways of language education.

The research was carried out after a detailed analysis of the linguistic situation in Lithuania. According to the data presented by Lithuanian Department of Statistics, at the beginning of 2010 there were 3 329 residents in Lithuania, among which 83.1% were Lithuanians, 4.8% – Russians, 6.0% – Poles, 1.1% – Belarusians; smaller communities include Ukrainians, Jews, Latvians, Roma, Tatars and Germans. 3.7% of the residents chose not to declare their nationality. As to the linguistic situation, however, it should also be mentioned, that one's native language does not directly correspond to official nationality (Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė 2005, Lichachiova 2009). As to the Poles, part of them “had converted to Russian in the past” (Zinkevicius 1993, as cited in Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė, 2005) while those “who live predominantly in the south-eastern regions are on the whole keen to protect their own identity” (Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė 2005). One can notice a tendency to choose Lithuanian-medium education for national minority children, since the percentage of students attending Lithuanian-medium school (92.65%) is 9.55% higher than the official number of people, claiming to be Lithuanians (83.1%).

However, the consequences of such a trend are not fully known and have never been researched on a sufficiently large scale in Lithuania. This situation raises an edu-

cational challenge for teachers and others involved, as “in south-eastern Lithuania there are now numerous schools where non-Lithuanian speakers (who are frequently monolingual before beginning their formal education) constitute as much as 60 to 70 percent of students in a class” (Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė, 2005). Zavjalova (2007) believes, that the present language situation is beneficial for forming coordinated or pure bilingualism, which is less frequently characterised with negative features usually attributed to non-monolingual individuals, i.e. language interference and code-switching problems. Nevertheless, some authors are not so optimistic as Zavjalova. Mazolevskienė (2003), as well as some other authors she quotes (Dodson, Oligvy, Ingham, and others) believe that it is wrong to ignore the native language of a linguistic minority child, which 71.3% of kindergarten teachers actually do (Mazolevskienė, 2003), as it makes more difficult to create a positive atmosphere for state language learning, the needs of non-Lithuanian speaking children are ignored and they are taught according to the principle “swim or sink”. Mazolevskienė (2003) studied kindergarten teachers’ attitude towards having children whose family language was not Lithuanian in the Lithuanian-medium kindergarten group. 64.5 % of the respondents claim that having such a child in a group is a problem, as the child cannot successfully communicate with peers, they are passive listeners in many educational activities, thus fall behind, the teachers do not have enough time to show individual attention and provide help needed for that group of children. On the other hand, even 89.5 % of the teachers think (Mazolevskienė, 2003) that non-Lithuanian speaking children should

be given additional help studying Lithuanian, however this is not done in practice. 73.3 % of teachers (ibid.) strongly disagree that other than Lithuanian language would get any exposure in Lithuanian-medium kindergarten. In their opinion “parents put the child in this type of institution because they want their child to learn Lithuanian, and the native language should only be spoken at home”. This leads to a child’s mother tongue gradually becoming weaker and weaker until the use of the native language becomes restricted to the primitive domestic conversation, with the child lacking vocabulary to discuss anything else.

What concerns pre-school learning of English (or any other language which is not used in Lithuania as a mother tongue by any significant group of residents) nothing is done to encourage parents to at least try and teach it as a second language to their children. School programmes are not flexible enough to satisfy the needs of families who are willing to teach and do teach a second language before the formal schooling starts. There is quite a revealing example in the magazine *Mamos žurnalas* (2007-9): in an advertisement for English language classes to 4 to 6-year-olds it is mentioned that after studying the language for 3 to 4 years (before school-teaching begins) and paying large sums of money for the classes, the children, when they do come to school and start the language again from the very first words, “will revise what they have already learned. There is nothing bad about revising, they will still have a stronger base to their language than those, who have not attended our classes”. A ridiculous explanation which should put off even a very enthusiastic parent.

## Empirical research on parents' attitude towards learning non-native languages at early age

### *Aims, procedure, participants and limitations*

The research on parents' attitudes towards their children attending a certain language medium school has been carried out in Vilnius, a multilingual town, with a vast majority of children coming into contact with one or even more languages besides their native one outside the classroom. In many cases parents themselves are fluent speakers of several languages, which may influence their opinion about the importance of being able to use more than one language. Thus, the results obtained might be applied to geographical areas where the linguistic situation is similar to that in Vilnius, but not other, more monolingual ones.

The investigation was conducted in 8 different schools of Vilnius. The criteria for the choice of the schools were *their location in the town* (they were all close to each other) and the *availability of their variety* (primary, basic and secondary) in the same area. Hence, the schools of Justiniškės district and surrounding districts (Viršuliškės,

Pašilaičiai and Šeškinė) were chosen, as in this part of Vilnius very close to each other there are primary, basic and secondary Lithuanian-medium, primary and basic Polish-medium, primary and secondary Russian-medium schools. The choice of schools was based on the presumption that in this area of Vilnius parents would be able to choose the school for their children according to the language of teaching they prefer, *but not because of* other factors important for young children's parents: the distance from home, and the environment. (Some parents prefer more "home-like" atmosphere of primary schools, while others are in favour of "more formal" environment of basic and secondary ones.) The schools participating in the research were the following:

Lithuanian-medium:

"Vyturio" primary school, "Taikos" basic school, "Sietuvos" secondary school (441 children).

Polish-medium:

"Vilija" primary school, Jono Pauliaus II basic school (238 children).

Russian-medium:

"Berželis" primary school, L. Karsavin secondary school, S. Kovalevskaja secondary school (252 children).

Table 1. The number of questionnaires in the research

The name of the school	The number of copies collected suitable for analysis
"Vyturio"	320
"Taikos"	56
"Sietuvos"	65
"Vilija"	81
Jono Pauliaus II	157
"Berželis"	42
L. Karsavino	67
S. Kovalevskajos	143
Total	931

To collect the data for the analysis a questionnaire to be filled in by students' parents was originally designed in Lithuanian and then translated into the Polish and Russian languages. The reason for distributing the questionnaires in parents' mother tongues was to ensure that parents of all the students felt equally at ease in answering open questions as fully as they wished and understood the questions of the questionnaire as precisely as possible. The number of the questionnaires distributed in different schools is shown in Table 1.

The data obtained during the research have been processed and analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 17.0 version.

### ***The first step: choosing the language of pre-school institution (kindergarten)***

The relationship between the choice of the kindergarten language and the language of elementary school chosen by parents is presented in Table 2.

It can be seen from the table above that it is highly unusual for those, who have chosen linguistic majority school for their

children to let the child experience another language environment before school. On the contrary, those who have chosen linguistic minority school welcome the experience of state language environment before school for their children. 29.7% of Russian – medium school students and 13.5% of Polish medium have had such experience. Thus, parents planning to choose Lithuanian as the language of schooling for their children choose Lithuanian-medium kindergartens for their offsprings, while almost one third of Russian speaking parents choose non-Russian medium kindergartens for their children (mostly Lithuanian-medium).

### ***The second step: choosing the language of schooling***

The vast majority of monolingual families choose their home language for schooling: out of 658 families, where parents are native speakers of the same language, 600 families (91.2% of monolingual families in the reasearch) have chosen this, and only 58 families (8.8% of monolingual families) have chosen a different than the home language for schooling of their children. The situation described has been found

Table 2. Languages chosen for kindergarten and elementary school

	The same language for kindergarten and school	Different languages for kindergarten and school at least for some period	Did not attend kindergarten	Total
Lithuanian medium school	431 (97.7%)	6 (1.3%)	4 (0.9%)	441 (100.0%)
Russian medium school	157 (63.1%)	74 (29.%)	18 (7.2%)	249 (100.0%)
Polish medium school	199 (84.0%)	32 (13.%)	6 (2.5%)	237 (100.0%)

mostly in families where both parents were native speakers of Russian, but have chosen either Lithuanian or Polish medium school for their children. As to Russian speaking parents who choose Polish medium school for their children, it can be assumed that majority of them are Poles who attended Russian medium school in Soviet times. (From personal conversations with families in such situations as well as school administration.)

One of the factors which proved to have had influence on the parents' choice of the language of schooling for their children was their educational background. As it can be seen from the data obtained, the proportion of parents with higher education is much higher among those parents who have chosen Lithuanian-medium schools for their children than Russian or Polish medium. (Mothers: 65.1%, 35.1%, 46.0% respectively, fathers: 52.2%, 26.5%, 28.5% respectively). The data show, that a group of Russian-speaking mothers or fathers with higher percentage of university education tend more to consider Lithuanian medium school as the right choice for the child, while

Polish speaking parents show the opposite tendency: a bigger group of parents with higher education choose Polish-medium school. What is more, linguistic majority parents with higher education are less likely to choose linguistic-minority medium schools for their children than Lithuanian-speaking parents with lower education. Furthermore, in all three linguistic groups the lowest percentage of parents with university education chooses Russian-medium school for their children. The noticed tendency supports Hogan-Brun and Ramonienė's (2005) claim that Russians are more tended "to see their children master the state language and attend mainstream education" than Poles and that "it is mainly the more educated strata of the minority population that favour Lithuanian-medium schools for their offsprings".

The second factor that proved important in the choice of the language of schooling for a child was parents' ability to use several languages fluently (Table 3).

It is interesting to note, that the number of fluent speakers of several languages is

Table 3. **Fluent speakers of three or more languages**

Schooling language chosen for the child	Speak Lithuanian, Russian and Polish fluently	Speak two languages out of Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, plus are fluent at English	Speak two languages out of Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, plus are fluent at German, French, Spanish or Italian	Speak more than three languages fluently	Total (% of all parents in the group)
Lithuanian	84 (9.9%)	72 (8.5%)	5 (0.6%)	8 (0.9%)	169 (843 in the group) (20.0%)
Russian	47 (10.1%)	7 (1.5%)	4 (0.9%)	3 (0.6%)	51 (462 in the group) (11.0%)
Polish	176 (38.4%)	6 (1.3%)	5 (1.1%)	20 (4.4%)	207 (458 in the group) (45.2%)

significantly lower among those, who have chosen Russian-medium school for their children. Also, if they are looked at closely, it can be detected, that out of 47 speaking Lithuanian, Russian and Polish fluently, 20 are native speakers of Polish, not Russian, which means that in fact only 6.7% of native speakers of Russian who have chosen Russian medium school speak three or more languages fluently. Nevertheless, out of 81 native speakers of Russian, who have chosen Lithuanian medium school for their child, the situation is very different: 13 (16%) of them are fluent in three or more languages.

### *The third step: including a non-native language into the child's routine*

An important factor in understanding the children's linguistic environment is the sources from which they hear other than native languages. There are considerable differences between linguistic majority and linguistic minority children (Figure 1). Linguistic majority children experience much

less influence of non-native languages, and for 41.5% of Lithuanian-speaking children the influence comes in a passive form: they hear a non-native language just watching TV. By "close environment" we mean the child's relatives and friends. The group experiencing influence of non-native language(s) from "close environment" also included the children whose parents mentioned that they often travelled abroad and used their foreign language skills there. Figures 1 and 2 present the languages parents teach to their children at home themselves.

While analysing graphs 2 and 3 several tendencies can be noticed:

1. In all three groups of languages of schooling fathers pay considerably less attention to teaching their children languages than mothers.
2. Those parents who have chosen Russian and Polish medium schools for their children pay more attention to teaching children local languages (Lithuanian and Russian or Polish) than English.

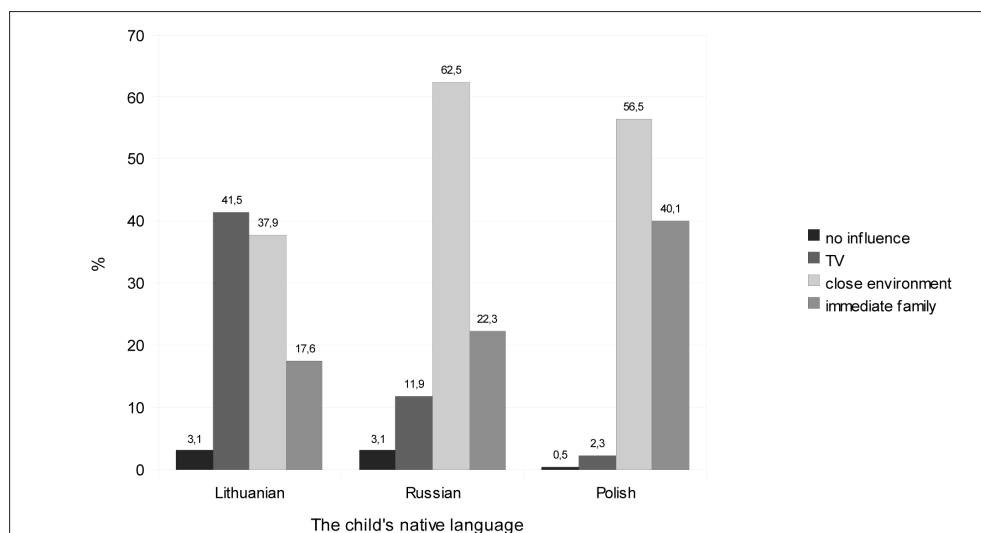


Fig. 1. The source influence of non-native language onto the children



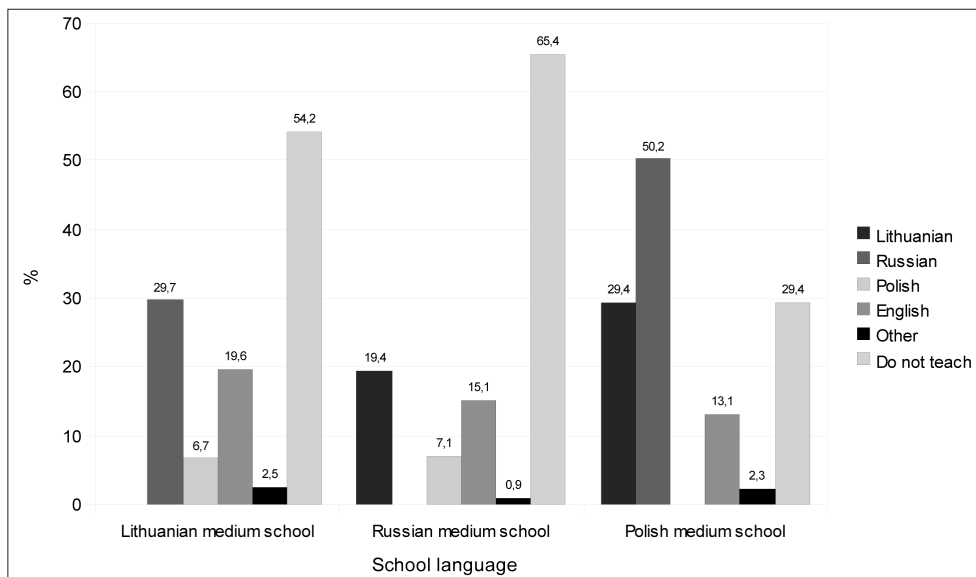


Fig. 2. Non-native languages mothers teach to their children

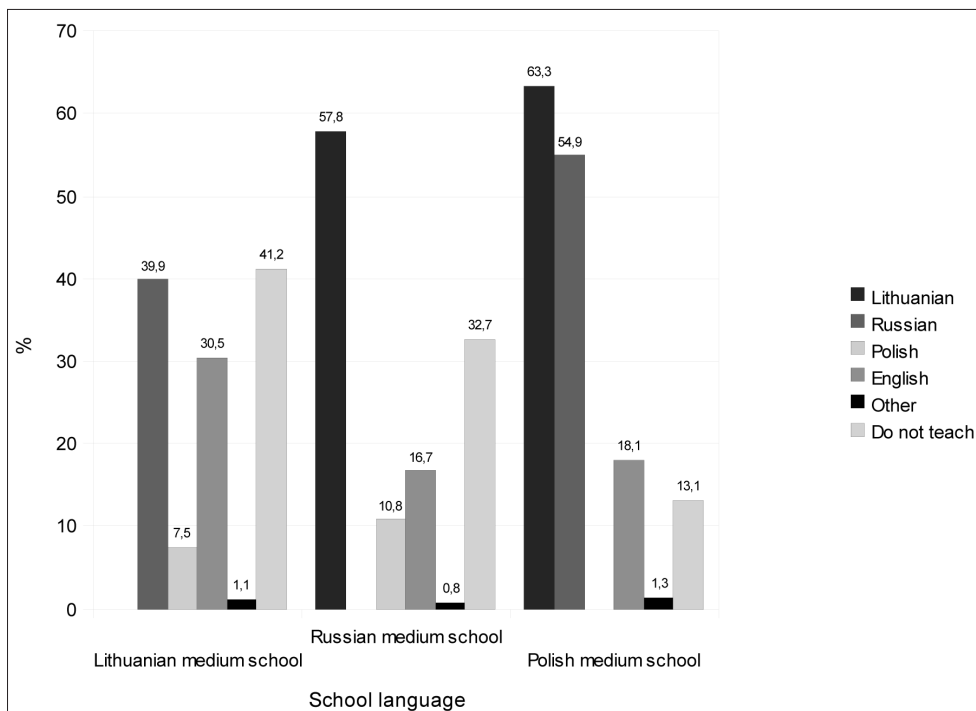


Fig. 3. Non-native languages fathers teach to their children



3. Those parents who have chosen Russian medium school for their children behave more like linguistic majority parents and teach their children non-native languages significantly less than those who have chosen Polish-medium school for their children.

The ways parents employ to teach their children non-native languages outside school also deserve consideration. 516 families (55.5%) teach their children naturally: they often speak to the child and/ or the child hears the parents using the language for real communication. 86 families (9.2%) teach their children formally at home. They organize classes for their child, use special books and do it systematically. 277 families (29.8%) send their children to formal additional classes of a non-native language. 113 children attended classes before they started school, 115 at school age, 4 both before school and at school and 38 children were taught by their parents formally as well as attended additional classes. Another point worth mentioning about additional classes is that those parents who have chosen Polish medium school twice as often as the other two groups send their children to additional non-native language classes. 45.4% of Polish families do so, while the number for Lithuanian families is only 22.9%, and 22.7% for Russian families whose children attend Russian medium schools. 295 (31.7%) families have decided not to teach children non-native languages previously to school or outside school at all (41.5% of Lithuanian, 38.2% of Russian, 6.7% of Polish medium schooling families). Although only 86 families claim to use special language-teaching materials, parents of 371 children state that they are interested in finding information how to teach children outside classroom.

Another important issue in the research was to find out why families decide to teach or not to teach their child a language additionally to obligatory school lessons. The most important reasons in favour of teaching languages additionally were the following: the knowledge of languages is useful as it broadens horizons and raises cultural awareness (514 answers), the knowledge of languages is useful, as it trains memory, thinking and phonetic skills (397), the child will have better possibilities to find a well-paid job (239), the child will have better possibilities to study abroad (235), the child will find it easier at school (232). The most important reasons against teaching a non-native language at an early age were: professional teachers at school will teach better (144), I do not know another language well enough to teach my child (126), I am afraid to "spoil" my child's another language by teaching wrong pronunciation or grammar (85), there are no speakers of other languages in the family (83). It can be easily noticed that the parents are not opposed to teaching languages to their children, but they are afraid "to do it wrong". Thus, introducing a short course for young parents who want to teach their children themselves would be an excellent idea. Even a brief course may help parents realize that even very basic knowledge of the target language they have plus a textbook suitable for the age group, which ensures methodical and systematic approach, can do wonders for a child's learning.

### **Some of the effects of early exposure to non-native languages**

The positive effect of early-life acquaintance with non-native languages can be illustrated by the example of English: children who learned it outside school, attending classes

or even just watching TV, feel much more positive about studying English at school. 159 parents emphasised inner motivation of their children. The typical answers were: “the child realises that English is needed for his/her future”, “wants to travel”, “wants to study abroad”, “wants to understand films, songs”, “wants to communicate with foreigners”, etc. As well as that, many of the parents claimed, that “the child does very well at English”, “it is easy for her/ him to study English”, “he/ she knows English better than the classmates”. Out of those who took care to explain why their children did not like learning English the absolute majority (86 out of 106) were the parents who put forward various learning difficulties, such as “difficult pronunciation”, “cannot memorize the words/ spelling”, “does not understand”, “requirements are too high”, “groups are too big and noisy”, as the primary source of the child’s negative attitude. Many of the parents, whose children “don’t really like English” marked it as “the lesson which is especially difficult for the child”. 97 children out of this group do not hear English outside school. 15.9% of children who study English outside school and 13.8% of those who watch TV in English regularly marked English as their favourite subject, compared to only 6.8% of children who are not exposed to English outside school.

Possible negative result of early-life exposure to non-native languages that parents often fear is linguistic development delays. The research proved that this is not the case. Parents were asked if their child needed a speech development specialist’s help. Baker (1996a) claims, that as many as 20% of children experience various language delays

and need speech therapist’s help at some stage. Out of 930 children in the survey 426 (45.8%) have never attended speech therapist’s sessions which means that 54.2%, much more than 20% mentioned by Baker, got the specialists’ help. The significant difference most probably can be explained by a very good system of help to children experiencing difficulties with their language in Lithuania. A number of bilingualism specialists (Baker, Grosjeans, Dopke and others) claim that being bilingual does not lead to any additional language development delays. The data of the survey confirm no relationship between being bilingual and speech development delays. While 55.13% of monolingual children (N=858) needed some language correction help, only 40.68% bilingual children (N=59) needed it as well.

## Conclusion

The results of the research let conclude that some of the factors, which may influence parents’ decision to teach the child more than one language previously to schooling, are the linguistic group that parents belong to, their educational background and their ability to speak more than one language fluently as well as the knowledge how to teach a language to a child. The research has proved that parents’ role in planning the child’s linguistic development and attitude towards the value of education is highly important and children of more interested parents are more successful and motivated. The research showed that becoming bilingual at an early age does not cause any additional long-term language development problems.

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### Zita Mažuolienė

Vilniaus universitetas, Lietuva

*Moksliniai interesai: lingvodidaktika, kalbinių kompetencijų vertinimas, testavimas, dalyko kalbos mokymas*

### Ana Jankūnienė

Vilniaus universitetas, Lietuva

*Moksliniai interesai: dvikalbystė, lingvodidaktika, integruotas dalyko ir kalbos mokymas*

## DVIKALBYSTĖ: KĄ PASIRINKTI?

### Santrauka

Straipsnis remiasi tyrimu, kurio tikslas – išsiaiškinti, kokie veiksniai lemia tėvų sprendimą ugdyti vaikų dvikalbystę. Šiame straipsnyje

### Zita Mažuolienė

Vilnius University, Lithuania

*Research interests: language didactics, language testing, language for specific purposes*

### Ana Jankūnienė

Vilnius University, Lithuania

*Research interests: bilingualism, young learners, language didactics, CLIL*

## BILINGUALISM: CHOICES TO BE MADE

### Summary

Both parents and teachers are very much concerned about possible negative consequences of introducing a child to more than one, native, language in the early childhood. The survey to

atskleidžiama, kad sprendimas siekti, kad vaikas mokėtų daugiau nei vieną kalbą ir ugdyti dvikalbystę nuo mažens, nepriklauso nuo aplinkos poveikio ar kalbinės terpės, kurioje auga vaikas, bet yra sąmoningo vaiko tėvų pasirinkimo rezultatas.

Straipsnyje išskiriami trys pagrindiniai etapai planuojant vaiko kalbinį ugdymą: ikimokyklinės įstaigos (darželio) kalbinės aplinkos pasirinkimas, mokyklos kalbos (lingua franca) pasirinkimas ir tėvų sprendimas vaiko veikloje rasti vietas ir laiko neformaliai mokyti kalbos. Tyrimas taip pat parodė, kad tėvų požiūris į negimtosios kalbos mokymą taip pat priklauso nuo to, kokiai kalbinei grupei jie priklauso ir nuo jų išsilavinimo. Tyrimo rezultatai taip pat patvirtino, kad, nepaisant teigiamo tėvų požiūrio į vaiko negimtosios kalbos mokymą, metodinių žinių stoka ir nepakankamas kitos kalbos mokėjimas trukdo arba riboja jų galimybes mokyti vaiką.

Tėvų apklausa parodė, kad tie vaikai, kurių tėvai moko juos negimtosios kalbos, yra labiau motyvuoti ir daug labiau vertina žinių svarbą, jiems geriau nei jų bendraamžiams sekasi mokykloje. Todėl straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad nuodugnus vaiko kalbinės plėtros planavimas yra ne tik labai svarbus, bet ir reikalauja profesionalios mokyklinių įstaigų ir kalbos ugdymo specialistų paramos.

**REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:** dvikalbystė, gimtoji kalba, negimtoji kalba, kalbinis ugdymas, mokymo įstaigos, tėvai

find out parents' attitude towards early-age language learning was conducted at eight schools of Vilnius which employ Lithuanian, Russian and Polish language as the medium for teaching. Thus, the present article concentrates on parents' decision to raise children being bilingual, analysis of the motives leading to this decision and the three steps of planning the child's linguistic development: the choice of the language of preschool (kindergarten) institution, the choice of the language of schooling, and parents' choice to include any additional language learning activities into the child's daily routine. The research claims that some of the factors influencing parents' decision to raise their children with more than one language depends on the linguistic group they belong to as well as their educational background.

Furthermore, the data collected in the survey prove, that although majority of parents feel positive about the idea of teaching a non-native language to the child, lack of methodological knowledge how to teach the language as well as insufficient knowledge of non-native languages prevent them from or limit their ability to do so.

The survey proves that children whose parents do teach them non-native languages enjoy the positive benefits of early bilingualism: they are more motivated to study at school and have a generally more positive attitude towards importance of knowledge, they are more successful at school than their peers and, contrary to a widespread belief, need help of speech-development specialists less frequently. Therefore, the article concludes that careful planning of the child's linguistic development is of primary importance and needs professional support from educational institutions.

**KEY WORDS:** bilingualism, mother tongue, non-native language, linguistic development

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