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Future Kindergarten Educators' Views Regarding the Role of Language as One of the Core Kindergarten Curriculum Areas

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Abstract: Kindergarten educators represent the first contact of children with the institutional environment. In this article we assume that kindergarten educators have a significant impact on children's perception of their first/mother tongue and their language development. Language is one of the core kindergarten curriculum areas in which the educator needs to be adequately empowered to set an example for the children, while at the same time developing their communicative competence which is the basis for (later) efficient communication. We carried out a questionnaire-based survey involving 236 students pursuing early childhood education in all three public universities in the Republic of Slovenia which prepares students for the role of kindergarten educators in order to study their perceptions of the language. The questionnaire-based survey was answered by students in their first and third years i.e., when starting and finishing their studies. A large majority of future kindergarten educators consider their positive attitude towards language in general to be extremely important for kindergarten children as language forms the basis for all other curriculum areas. Also, when surveyed, almost all future kindergarten educators considered it essential to be proficient in the language and to encourage language development in children by following their own example. Furthermore, they believe it is important to have a well-developed linguistic capability (language knowledge), to have the capability of crafting linguistically accurate written content and to master a suitable literary expression.

Keywords: *Educator's example, future kindergarten educators, kindergarten, linguistic capability, mother tongue.*

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Introduction

Since kindergarten educators represent a child's first contact with the institutional environment (everywhere in Europe they interact directly with them in the learning process before the age of one until they enter school), kindergarten educators have a significant influence on children's perception of their first/mother tongue and their linguistic development. The purpose of this paper is to examine the views of future kindergarten educators on the role that language plays in education. Language is namely one of the core kindergarten curriculum areas in which the educator needs to be adequately empowered to set an example for the children, while at the same time developing their communicative competence which, in its broadest sense, means the ability to comprehend and produce texts of various kinds, thereby providing the basis for (later) proficient communication. Through theoretical insights and empirical findings, the aim of this paper is to assess the basic assumption that future kindergarten educators' perception of language is one of the core kindergarten curriculum areas that has a significant impact on a child's perception of their mother tongue and their linguistic and communicative development. Furthermore, we look at the way so-called "transfer power" of example effects children's (later communication skills in different speaking situations. In order to make this assessment we therefore decided to carry out a quantitative survey. In the questionnaire-based survey involving 236 students pursuing early childhood education in all three public universities in the Republic of Slovenia, which prepare students for the role of early childhood educators, we studied their opinion regarding language and the production of written and spoken texts in kindergarten, as well as their progress in this field during their studies. The questionnaire-based survey was answered by students in their first and third year of public higher education programmes in the field of early childhood education, i.e., when starting and finishing their studies. We will then be able to formulate suggestions for improving kindergarten teachers' language skills based on these findings.

Literature Review

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Training of Educators in the Republic of Slovenia and the Kindergarten Curriculum

An early childhood educator in the Republic of Slovenia may be anyone who has completed a higher professional study program of early childhood education which lasts three years, and is undertaken at three public universities, i.e., the University of Ljubljana, the University of Maribor and the University of Primorska. The basic aim of the programme is to train students so that they provide quality education when working with younger children – pre-school children and children in the first grade of a nine-year primary school (Primary School Act, 1996) and also when engaging with parents, colleagues and other professionals.

Education in Slovenian kindergartens is based on the Kindergarten Curriculum (Bahovec et al., 1999), which is a national document and applies to all public kindergartens throughout the country. Together with professional literature, it enables professional planning and quality early childhood education for educators. It includes activities that are classified into the following areas: movement, language, art, society, nature and mathematics. Language development is naturally involved in all areas of activity so, in our opinion, it represents the basis for all other curricular areas. As stated in the Kindergarten Curriculum (Bahovec et al., 1999, pp. 18–19), "linguistic activity in the preschool period includes a wide range of cooperation and communication with adults, children, acquaintance with the written language and (through experience) with Slovenian literature as well as the world of youth literature. During this period, children learn to express their experiences, emotions and thoughts, and they also learn to understand when others communicate. Linguistic activities are related to all linguistic levels: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic (and pragmatic)". That is why we emphasise the role of language in this paper because we believe it is crucial that educators in this field are aware and empowered, as they also set an example for children (For further information regarding education professionals, see Petek (2021)). We believe it is also important that linguistic content during their studies reminds them of the above[†].

The Role of Language in Kindergartens in the Republic of Slovenia

Drnovšek (2021) points out that the educators spend up to 9 hours a day with children in kindergarten, i.e. more than a third of the day. A child learns his/her mother tongue subconsciously from the educator, while an educator usually prepares a high-quality language environment for the child by planning activities and providing materials for spontaneous play. In this way, the educator provides the children with an example to imitate and a language model, which is why it is very important that an educator is conscious of the language he/she uses and teaches it to the children in an appropriate way.

Petek (2019) states that from the point of view of language in the kindergarten, the division into verbal and non-verbal parts appears important. For the effective use of language, it is important to emphasise verbal language, i.e. type of social language, meaningfully appropriate choice of words, grammatical correctness, standard pronunciation – standard pronunciation of voices, standard (dynamic) accent and non-verbal elements that accompany it, i.e. auditory non-verbal companions of speech (intonation, accents, speed, pauses, register and voice colour) and visible non-verbal companions of speech (facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures and movement around the playroom) (For more information, see Petek (2018)).

Baloh (2019) states that in early language learning, the child's positive experience with language is the greatest motivation for further work and encouragement to achieve a higher level of knowledge. For a child in the early childhood period, language is only a means of communication and never a goal, as children are interested in new information. Children are interested in what we communicate with language, not language as such with all its grammatical and pragmatic dimensions. In order to develop speech[‡], they need a stimulating environment in which they will be able to use speech. This means that they need the opportunity to hear and use speech in different situations, and they also need the encouragement of adults and peers. In the process of early language learning, children go through various stages of acquiring language knowledge and skills. There is an interaction between the educator and the child when learning content; such interaction is influenced to a greater or lesser extent by several internal and external factors. If we want a child's experience with language to be as positive as possible, then the educator must have a positive attitude towards language, but at the same time possess well-developed communicative competence and, within this, specifically language competence.

The Importance of the Educator's Communicative Competence as an Example for Children

Communicative competence refers to the linguistic and pragmatic abilities of an individual[§] that realise linguistic use. Communicative competence is human knowledge with the ability to communicate in different communicative circumstances (Bešter Turk, 2011) or the ability to critically accept texts of various types and the ability to create effective, understandable and linguistically correct texts of various types (Križaj & Bešter Turk, 2018). In recent years,

[†]To this end, we included future educators in the sample where the field of language needs to be developed especially during the study.

[‡]The (future) educator, who has a positive attitude towards the language and who knows how to motivate the child for activities related to the language, certainly also represents a stimulating environment.

[§]In our case, a (future) educator.

however, there has also been a need to develop a critical level, which is why the term 'critical communicative competence' is increasingly mentioned in the literature. Vogel (2021, p. 8) defined as a goal of education as follows: "a developed communicative competence that includes functional and cultural ability and upgrades them by critical communication, where participants also consider a broader context, emotional expansion and strive for planned assessment based on criteria, surpassing emotional likes/dislikes, prejudice, stabilised perspectives and, after considering their own communication (metacognition), also their ethical and social responsibility".

Communicative ability is complex and consists of several building blocks: motivation to receive and communicate; material knowledge; language ability; non-verbal communicative ability; stylistic or pragmatic ability and meta-linguistic ability (Bešter Turk, 2011). Each building block is important for the development of communicative ability. One of them is linguistic ability, i.e., "mastering or knowledge of a given verbal language" (Šek Mertük, 2017, p. 128). Bešter Turk defines linguistic ability as "mastering or knowledge of a given verbal language" (Bešter Turk, 2011, p. 122). Verbal language consists of words and an understanding of the rules in order to link/compose them into expansive units, such as sentences and texts, and also the rules governing their auditory or visual formulation. For this reason, human language ability is built on the basis of naming/word/dictionary, narrative/syntactic/grammatical, as well as verbal and orthographic ability (Bešter Turk, 2011). According to Bešter et al. (2009, p. 4), the development of the components of communicative ability "includes the development of naming, narrative, verbal, orthographic, pragmatic and meta-linguistic abilities and the ability of non-verbal communication". The educator must have all these components properly developed so that he/she can (gradually) develop them in children in kindergarten. That is why we are interested in a more detailed opinion of future educators about language as one of the fundamental areas in the kindergarten curriculum. The results of the research we conducted are presented in the empirical part of the paper.

Methodology

Purpose and Objectives of the Research

As part of the empirical research, we wanted to check the opinions of early childhood education students in the 1st and 3rd years using a questionnaire-based survey for: (a) their attitude towards language in general; (b) their opinion regarding the importance of developing their own language ability; (c) their opinion regarding the competence for linguistically correct and effective production of written and spoken texts and (d) their need to acquire additional knowledge in the field of language. In addition to the findings based on basic descriptive statistics, the aim was to present the following results: (1) whether there are differences between 1st and 3rd year students in how they viewed the statement that an educator's positive attitude towards language is very important for children in kindergarten in general, because language is the basis for all other curricular areas; that it is necessary for an educator to master language because the educator represents the first point of contact of children within the educational environment; that an educator encourages the development of language in children by his/her own example and sets an example to them; (2) If there are differences between 1st and 3rd year students in the assessment of the importance of well-developed linguistic ability (language knowledge); if there are differences in the assessment of the importance of the ability to form linguistically correct written texts and in the assessment of how important it is to master the appropriate literary expression; how often they think about linguistic correctness while forming written and spoken texts themselves; whether there are differences in the self-assessment of the ability to form linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten; how often they create written texts of different text types and how often they create spoken texts containing different textual types; (3) If there is a correlation between the year of study and the opinion that the work of the educator requires continuous professional development of the language; whether there is a difference in the assessment of how important it is to renew and improve knowledge in the field of language and whether there is a difference in the assessment regarding additional knowledge that they feel is still needed in the field of language; (4) If there is a difference in attitude between students at different universities regarding the statement that 'it is necessary for the educator to master the language, because the educator represents the first contact of children with the educational environment'; or whether there is a difference between students at different universities in the assessment of the importance of well-developed language ability (language knowledge); (5) If there is a correlation between the university and the opinion that the work of the educator requires continuous professional language development; whether there is a difference between students at different universities in the assessment of the importance to renew and improve language knowledge; and whether there is a difference in opinion between students at different universities in the assessment of any additional knowledge that they believe is still required in the field of language; (6) If there is a correlation between their assessment of the importance of creating linguistically correct written texts and the self-assessment of competence for it at work in the kindergarten; whether there is a correlation between the assessment of the importance of mastering appropriate literary expression and the self-assessment of competence for its use at work in the kindergarten.

Research Method and Research Sample

We used a descriptive and causal, non-experimental method for our pedagogical research. For this purpose, we used an online questionnaire** consistent with the defined purpose and objectives of the research (*validity*). We checked whether it was *comprehensible* and confirmed this by using ten early-childhood education students selected at random. The *reliability* of the questionnaire was tested by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The survey was anonymous and the questionnaire was prepared in advance and published online to ensure *objectivity*. Furthermore, all respondents were given as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaire. The sensitivity of the questionnaire was reflected in the range of responses received.

The questionnaire-based survey was completed by 281 students, but due to the excessive number of omitted/missing answers, 45 of these were excluded from further analysis. The final sample size was thus 236. Of these, 68% were 1st-year students and 32% were 3rd-year students. 40% of them were from the University of Ljubljana, 49% from the University of Maribor and 11% from the University of Primorska††.

Hypotheses, Processing and Displaying the Data

In accordance with the research purpose and goals, we have set different hypotheses according to selected thematic areas which we have written in full in the Findings/Results chapter for transparency and non-duplicate content.

For data processing, we used the IBM SPSS Statistics 29 software tool. Since all variables are nominal or ordinal, we have used non-parametric tests to test our hypotheses. To check the correlation between the two nominal variables we used the chi-square test of independence, to check the correlation between the two ordinal variables we used the Spearman's correlation coefficient, and to check the differences between the first and third year we used the Mann-Whitney test. To check the differences between the three universities we used the Kruskal-Wallis test. The results are presented below in tabular form with a textual interpretation.

Findings/Results

First, we present the results of basic descriptive statistics followed by the results of hypothesis verification. The statement: "The educator's positive attitude towards language in general is very important for children in kindergarten because language is the basis for all other curricular areas." was agreed in part by 38% students and fully agreed by 61%, consequently agreed in general by 99% of 1st and 3rd year students. The statement "Since the educator represents the first point of contact of children within the educational environment, it is necessary that he/she masters the language" was agreed in part by 42% of students and fully agreed by 56%. Consequently, it was generally agreed by 98% of all students. The statement "The educator, by his/her own example, encourages the development of language in children and sets an example to them" was agreed in part by 33% of students and was fully agreed by 66% of them. It was therefore generally agreed by 99% of students.

When asked "How important do you think it is to have a well-developed language ability (language skills)?" 41% of students answered that it is important while 57% of students considered it very important, consequently 98% of students felt it was generally important.

When asked "How important do you think it is to be able to form linguistically correct written texts?" 47% of students answered that it is important while 49% of students felt it is very important. Consequently 96% of students agreed in general.

When asked "How important do you think it is to master an appropriate literary expression?" 54% of students answered it is important while 33% of students considered it very important. Combined, 87% of students therefore agreed while 12% answered that they were undecided. When asked "How often do you think about linguistic correctness when creating written and spoken texts?" 33% of students answered 'often' and 23% answered 'very often'. Making it 56% of students when combined, while 33% of the students answered 'fairly often'; and 11% of students answered 'rarely'. So, in total, 44% of students deemed it less important.

When asked "How qualified do you feel to create linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten?" 56% of the students felt they were 'well qualified', while 37% considered they were 'very well qualified' and 3% of students

**We divided the questionnaire into four sections: (a) attitudes towards language in general; (b) the importance of developed language skills; (c) the competence in composing written and spoken texts linguistically, correctly and effectively and (d) the needs of future kindergarten educators in acquiring additional language skills. The questions were close-ended and were answered by the respondents using various 5-point Likert scale.

††The sample includes full-time, pre-school education students studying at all three public universities in Slovenia, i.e., at Ljubljana, Maribor and Koper. The respondents regarding the first year of study were 19 years old and the respondents regarding the third year of study were 21 years old. The sample included the majority of all students enrolled in pre-school education programmes, so the sample is representative.

answered 'extremely well' qualified, the latter two groups combined therefore 40% of the students felt they were highly qualified, while 3% considered they were 'poorly qualified'.

When asked "How qualified do you feel in using the appropriate literary expression when working in the kindergarten?" 56% of students answered 'well qualified', 37% of students answered 'very well qualified' and 4% answered 'extremely well qualified', while 4% of the students thought they were 'poorly qualified'.

When asked "How often do you create written texts of different text types?" 43% of students answered 'fairly often', 26% answered 'often' while 7% of students answered 'very often', combined making 33% of students being more inclined to create their own written texts, while 21% of students answered 'rarely' and 2% 'very rarely'. When asked "How often do you create spoken texts of different text types?" 42% of students answered 'fairly often', 31% answered 'often' and 10% of students answered 'very often', while 15% of students answered 'rarely' and 2% 'very rarely'.

When asked "What is your self-assessment regarding the formation of linguistically correct written texts?" 60% of students answered 'good', 31% answered 'very good' and 3% answered 'extremely good', the latter two groups therefore making a combined total of 34% of the students. 5% of the students answered 'bad', while 1% answered 'very bad'. When asked "What is your self-assessment regarding the use of appropriate literary expression?" 61% of students answered 'good', 31% of students answered 'very good' and 3% of students answered 'excellent', the last two groups together making 34% of the students. 5% of the students answered 'bad'.

78% of students believe that the work of an educator requires continuous professional development in the language. In their explanations, the following answers prevailed: "it is important to maintain and renew knowledge while following modern guidelines", "thus the educator expands his/her vocabulary and consequently transfers this to the child", "this is how we improve our speech", "because language is the basic way of communicating with parents and children", "because language is constantly being renewed and updated", "because children have to learn the correct pronunciation from an early age", "because we forget the rules and we need to refresh them", "because as educators in this field we should possess a lot of knowledge and experience in order to pass on the correct knowledge to younger generations", "because children constantly ask different questions we must therefore be able to answer them", "because we are an example to children and we encounter language every day", "because, after all, it is the educator who teaches children, and if he/she has more knowledge, it will be easier for him/her to pass on basic knowledge to children and he/she will feel more confident about it himself/herself", "new scientific findings are constantly emerging that can positively affect the educator's work, behaviour and personality, so it is important that he/she attends training sessions, improves his/her knowledge and at the same time acquires new ideas for activities in the kindergarten," because it is important that they learn new ways in how to bring the language closer to children, for example, which fairy tales we are allowed to read, so that we can be more critical and we also need to check activities such as: how to present children's books, text and speech performance etc., and at the same time the guidelines in this regard are constantly changing and new insights and evidence are emerging".

When asked "How important do you think it is to renew and improve your knowledge in the field of language?" 61% of students answered 'important' while 28% of students answered 'very important', combined making 89% of students feeling that it was important to some degree with 8% of the students remaining undecided.

When asked "How much additional knowledge do you think you need in the field of language?" 33% of students answered 'much' and 7% of students answered 'very much', combined making 40% of the students asked. 40% of students were undecided while 20% answered that they 'only need a little additional knowledge'. To the question "What topics in the field of language do you want to learn more about in the future?", to which they could decide on several possible answers, most of them chose the area relating to types of text (writing invitations, notices and minutes etc.), followed by the field of orthoepy and verbal performance, followed by orthography and the formation of linguistically correct written texts. Some, to a lesser extent, would like to be educated in the fields of morphology and syntax in the future.

Below, based on the calculations, we present hypotheses and answers to them.

H1: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in their agreement regarding the statement that 'the educator's positive attitude towards language in general is very important for children in the kindergarten because language is the basis for all other curricular areas'.

As can be seen from Table 1, the average level of agreement with the statement that 'the educator's positive attitude towards language is generally very important for children in kindergarten', was 4.55 for 1st year students and 4.72 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 5260.0$; $p = .024$), so we can therefore say that there is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in the level of agreement with the statement that 'the educator's positive attitude towards language in general is very important for children in kindergarten'. Thus, the hypothesis H1 can be confirmed.

Table 1. The Difference Between 1st and 3rd Year Students in Their Agreement With the Statement^{##}

School Year	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
1st year	157	4.55	.548	5.00	5260.0	.024
3rd year	79	4.72	.451	5.00		

H2: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in their agreement with the statement that 'it is necessary for the educator to master the language, because the educator represents the first point of contact for children with the educational environment'.

As can be seen from Table 2, the average level of agreement with the statement that 'it is necessary for an educator to master the language because the educator represents the first point of contact for children with the educational environment', was 4.46 for 1st year students and 4.72 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4724.5$; $p = .001$), so we can say that there is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in the level of agreement with the statement that 'it is necessary for the educator to master the language because the educator represents the first point of contact for children in the educational environment'. Thus, the hypothesis H2 can be confirmed.

Table 2. The Difference Between 1st and 3rd Year Students in Their Agreement With the Statement^{##}

School Year	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
1st year	157	4.46	.572	4.00	4724.5	.001
3rd year	79	4.72	.451	5.00		

H3: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in their agreement with the statement that 'the educator encourages the development of language in children by his/her own example and sets an example to them.

As can be seen from Table 3, the average level of agreement with the statement that the educator encourages the development of language in children by his/her own example and sets an example to them., was 4.64 for 1st year students and 4.71 for 3rd year students. However, the result of the Mann-Whitney test is not statistically significant ($U = 5823.0$; $p = .348$), so it cannot be said that there is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in the level of agreement with the statement that the educator encourages the development of language in children by his/her own example and sets an example to them. Hypothesis H3 cannot be confirmed.

Table 3. Difference in Agreement with the Statement: 'the Educator Encourages the Development of Language in Children by his/her Own Example and Sets an Example to Them'

School Year	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
1st year	157	4.64	.494	5.00	5823.0	.348
3rd year	79	4.71	.457	5.00		

H4: There is a difference in their assessment of how important well-developed linguistic ability (language knowledge) is between 1st and 3rd year students.

As can be seen from Table 4, the average assessment of how important well-developed linguistic ability (language knowledge) is amounted to 4.47 for 1st year students and 4.72 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4803.5$; $p = .001$), so we can say that there is a difference in the assessment of how important well-developed linguistic ability (language skills) is between 1st and 3rd year students. Thus, the hypothesis H4 can be confirmed.

^{##}"The educator's positive attitude towards language in general is very important for children in kindergarten, because language is the basis for all other curricular areas."

^{##}"It is necessary for the educator to master the language because the educator represents the first point of contact with children in the educational environment."

Table 4. Difference in the Assessment of the Importance of Well-Developed Linguistic Ability (Language Skills)

	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	157	4.47	.572	5.00	4803.5	.001
3rd year	79	4.72	.451	5.00		

H5: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in the assessment of how important it is to know how to create linguistically correct written texts.

As can be seen from Table 5, the average assessment of how important it is to know how to create linguistically correct written texts was 4.35 for 1st year students and 4.63 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4753.0$; $p = .001$), so we can say that there is a difference in the assessment of how important it is to know how to create linguistically correct written texts between 1st and 3rd year students. Thus, the hypothesis H5 can be confirmed.

Table 5. Difference in the Assessment of How Important It Is to Know How to Create Linguistically Correct Written Texts

	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	157	4.35	.629	4.00	4753.0	.001
3rd year	79	4.63	.485	5.00		

H6: There is a difference in their assessment of how important it is to master the appropriate literary expression between 1st and 3rd year students.

As can be seen from Table 6, the average assessment of how important it is to master the appropriate literary expression for 1st year students was 4.09, and for 3rd year students it was 4.36. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4789.5$; $p = .003$), so we can say that there is a difference in the assessment of how important it is to master the appropriate literary expression between 1st and 3rd year students. Thus, the hypothesis H6 can be confirmed.

Table 6. Difference in the Assessment of how important It Is to Master the Appropriate Literary Expression

	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	157	4.09	.683	4.00	4789.5	.003
3rd year	78	4.36	.702	4.00		

H7: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students regarding how often they think about linguistic correctness while producing written and spoken texts.

As can be seen from Table 7, how often they think about linguistic correctness on average while producing written and spoken texts was 3.56 for 1st year students and 3.94 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4857.5$; $p = .006$), so we can say that there is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in how often think about linguistic correctness while creating written and spoken texts. Thus, the hypothesis H7 can be confirmed.

Table 7. The Difference in How Often They Think About Linguistic Correctness While Creating Written and Spoken Texts

	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	156	3.56	.965	4.00	4857.5	.006
3rd year	79	3.94	.911	4.00		

H8: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students regarding the self-assessment of the ability to create linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten.

As can be seen from Table 8, the average self-assessment of the ability to create linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten was 3.27 for 1st year students and 3.65 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4222.5$; $p < .001$), so it can be said that there is a difference between 1st and 3rd year

students regarding the self-assessment of the ability to create linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten. Thus, the hypothesis H8 can be confirmed.

Table 8. Difference in Self-Assessment of the Ability to Create Linguistically Correct Written Texts for Work in Kindergarten

	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	157	3.27	.614	3.00	4222.5	< .001
3rd year	79	3.65	.600	4.00		

H9: There is a difference in the self-assessment of the ability to use the relevant literary expression when working in kindergarten between 1st and 3rd year students.

As can be seen from Table 9, the average self-assessment of the ability to use the relevant literary expression at work in kindergarten was 3.29 for 1st year students and 3.62 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4528.0$; $p < .001$), so we can say that there is a difference in the self-assessment of the ability to use the appropriate literary expression when working in kindergarten between 1st and 3rd year students. Thus, the hypothesis H9 can be confirmed.

Table 9. Difference in Self-Assessment of the Ability to Use the Relevant Literary Expression at Work in Kindergarten

	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	157	3.29	.610	3.00	4528.0	< .001
3rd year	79	3.62	.606	4.00		

H10: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students regarding how often they create written texts using different types of text.

As can be seen from Table 10, the average frequency in creating written texts using different types of text was 3.05 for 1st year students and 3.35 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 5082.5$; $p = .025$), so we can say that there is a difference in how often they create written texts using different types of text between 1st and 3rd year students. Thus, the hypothesis H10 can be confirmed.

Table 10. Difference in How Often They Create Written Texts using Different Types of Text

	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	157	3.05	.904	3.00	5082.5	.025
3rd year	78	3.35	.895	3.00		

H11: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in how often they create oral texts using different types of text.

As can be seen from Table 11, the average frequency in creating oral texts using different types of text was 3.17 for 1st year students and 3.65 for 3rd year students. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4411.0$; $p < .001$), so we can say that there is a difference in how often they create oral texts using different of types text between 1st and 3rd year students. Thus, the hypothesis H11 can be confirmed.

Table 11. Difference in How Often They Create Oral Texts using Different Types of Text

	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
School Year						
1st year	156	3.17	.908	3.00	4411.0	< .001
3rd year	79	3.65	.878	4.00		

H12: There is a correlation between the year of study and the opinion that the work of the educator requires continuous professional development in the language.

As can be seen from Table 12, 89.8% of 1st year students believe that the work of the educator requires continuous professional development in the language, while 94.9% of 3rd year students share the same opinion. However, the result of the chi-square test is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.182$; $p = .277$), so it cannot be said that there is a correlation between the year of study and the opinion that the work of the educator requires continuous professional development in the language. Hypothesis H12 cannot be confirmed.

Table 12. *There is a Correlation Between the Year of Study and the Opinion That the Work of the Educator Requires Continuous Professional Development in the Language*

	School Year			
	1st year		3rd year	
	N	%	N	%
In your opinion, does the work of the educator require continuous professional development in the language?				
Yes	141	89.8	75	94.9
No	16	10.2	4	5.1
Total	157	100.0	79	100.0

* $\chi^2 = 1.182$; $p = .277$

H13: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in the assessment of the importance of renewing and improving language knowledge.

As can be seen from Table 13, the average assessment of how important it is to renew and improve language knowledge for 1st year students was 4.07, and for 3rd year students it was 4.28. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 5150.5$; $p = .014$), so we can say that there is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in the assessment of the importance of renewing and improving language knowledge. Thus, the hypothesis H13 can be confirmed.

Table 13. *Difference in the Assessment of the Importance of Renewing and Improving Language Knowledge*

School Year	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
1st year	157	4.07	.726	4.00	5150.5	.014
3rd year	79	4.28	.715	4.00		

H14: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in their assessment of additional knowledge that they feel they still need in the field of language.

As can be seen from Table 14, the average assessment of additional knowledge that they still need in the field of language for 1st year students was 3.42, and for 3rd year students it was 3.01. The result of the Mann-Whitney test is statistically significant ($U = 4581.0$; $p = .001$), so we can say that there is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in the assessment of additional knowledge that they still need in the field of language. Thus, the hypothesis H14 can be confirmed.

Table 14. *Difference in the Assessment of Additional Knowledge They Still Need in the Field of Language*

School Year	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney test	
					U	p
1st year	156	3.42	.842	3.00	4581.0	.001
3rd year	79	3.01	.840	3.00		

H15: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in their agreement with the statement that 'the educator's positive attitude towards language in general is very important for children in kindergarten because language is the basis for all other curricular areas'.

As can be seen from Table 15, the average level of agreement with the statement that 'the educator's positive attitude towards language is very important for children in kindergarten in general', was 4.64 for students of the University of Ljubljana, 4.59 for students of the University of Maribor and 4.60 for students of the University of Primorska. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test is not statistically significant ($H = .202$; $p = .904$), so it cannot be said that there is a difference between students of different universities in the level of agreement with the statement that 'the educator's positive

attitude towards language, in general, is very important for children in a kindergarten'. Hypothesis H15 cannot be confirmed.

Table 15. The Difference in Agreement with the Statement among Students of Different Universities****

University	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Kruskal-Wallis test	
					H	p
University of Ljubljana	91	4.64	.483	5.00		
University of Maribor	120	4.59	.558	5.00	.202	.904
University of Primorska	25	4.60	.500	5.00		

H16: There is a difference between students of different universities in their agreement with the statement that 'it is necessary for the educator to master the language because the educator represents the first point of contact for children with the educational environment'.

As can be seen from Table 16, the average level of agreement with the statement that it is necessary for the educator to master the language because the educator represents the first point of contact for children in the educational environment', was 4.53 for students of the University of Ljubljana, 4.57 for students of the University of Maribor and 4.48 for students of the University of Primorska. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test is not statistically significant ($H = 1.057$; $p = .589$), so it cannot be said that there is a difference between students of different universities in the level of agreement with the statement that 'it is necessary for the educator to master the language because the educator represents the first point of contact for children in the educational environment'. Hypothesis H16 cannot be confirmed.

Table 16. Difference in Agreement With the Statement among Students of Different Universities***

University	N	Average	St. deviation	Median	Kruskal-Wallis test	
					H	p
University of Ljubljana	91	4.53	.524	5.00		
University of Maribor	120	4.57	.560	5.00	1.057	.589
University of Primorska	25	4.48	.586	5.00		

H17: There is a difference between 1st and 3rd year students in their agreement with the statement that 'the educator encourages the development of language in children by his/her own example and sets an example for them.

As can be seen from Table 17, the average level of agreement with the statement that 'the educator encourages the development of language in children by his/her own example and sets an example for them, was 4.43 for students of the University of Ljubljana, 4.70 for students of the University of Maribor and 4.64 for students of the University of Primorska. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test is not statistically significant ($H = 1.544$; $p = .462$), so it cannot be said that there is a difference among students of different universities in the degree of agreement with the statement that 'the educator encourages the development of language in children by his/her own example and sets an example for them'. Hypothesis H17 cannot be confirmed.

Table 17. Difference in Agreement with the Statement: 'the Educator Encourages the Development of Language in Children by his/her Own Example and Sets an Example for Them'

University	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Kruskal-Wallis Test	
					H	p
University of Ljubljana	91	4.63	.486	5.00		
University of Maribor	120	4.70	.478	5.00	1.544	.462
University of Primorska	25	4.64	.490	5.00		

H18: There is a difference in the assessment of how important well-developed language ability (language knowledge) is between students of different universities.

****"The educator's positive attitude towards language in general is very important for children in kindergarten because language is the basis for all other curricular areas."

***"It is necessary for the educator to master the language because the educator represents the first point of contact with children in the educational environment."

As can be seen from Table 18, the average assessment of the importance of well-developed language ability (language knowledge) amounted to 4.55 for students of the University of Ljubljana, 4.57 for students of the University of Maribor and 4.52 for students of the University of Primorska. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test is not statistically significant ($H = .660$; $p = .719$), so it cannot be said that there is a difference between students of different universities in the assessment of the importance of well-developed language ability (language knowledge). Hypothesis H18 cannot be confirmed.

Table 18. Difference in the Assessment of the Importance of Well-Developed Language Ability (Language Knowledge) Between Students From Different Universities

University	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Kruskal-Wallis Test	
					H	p
University of Ljubljana	91	4.55	.500	5.00		
University of Maribor	120	4.57	.590	5.00	.660	.719
University of Primorska	25	4.52	.510	5.00		

H19: There is a connection between the university and the opinion that the work of the educator requires continuous professional development in the language.

As can be seen from Table 19, 94.5% of students of the University of Ljubljana believe that the work of an educator requires continuous professional development in language, 90.0% of students of the University of Maribor also believe this, while 88.0% of students at the University of Primorska are of the same opinion. However, the result of the chi-square test is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.803$; $p = .406$), so it cannot be said that there is a correlation between the university and the opinion that the work of the educator requires continuous professional development in the language. Hypothesis H19 cannot be confirmed.

Table 19. There is a Connection Between the University and the Opinion That the Work of the Educator Requires Continuous Professional Development in the Language

	University					
	of Ljubljana		of Maribor		of Primorska	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
In your opinion, does the work of the educator require continuous professional development of language?						
Yes	86	94.5	108	90.0	22	88.0
No	5	5.5	12	10.0	3	12.0
Total	91	100.0	120	100.0	25	100.0

* $\chi^2 = 1.803$; $p = .406$

H20: There is a difference between students from different universities in the assessment of the importance of renewing and upgrading their knowledge in the field of language.

As can be seen from Table 20, the average assessment of the importance of renewing and improving language skills for students of the University of Ljubljana was 4.19, for students of the University of Maribor it was 4.11 and for students of the University of Primorska it was 4.12. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test is not statistically significant ($H = 0.452$; $p = .798$), so it cannot be said that there is a difference between students of different universities in the assessment of the importance of renewing and improving their knowledge in the field of language. Hypothesis H20 cannot be confirmed.

Table 20. Difference in the Assessment of the Importance of Renewing and Improving Language Skills Between Students From Different Universities

University	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Kruskal-Wallis test	
					H	p
University of Ljubljana	91	4.19	.631	4.00		
University of Maribor	120	4.11	.828	4.00	.452	.798
University of Primorska	25	4.12	.526	4.00		

H21: There is a difference between students of different universities in the assessment of additional knowledge that they still need in the field of language.

As can be seen from Table 21, the average assessment of additional knowledge they still need in the field of language was 3.22 for students of the University of Ljubljana, 3.28 for students of the University of Maribor and 3.52 for students of the University of Primorska. The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test is not statistically significant ($H = 1.936$; $p = .380$), so it cannot be said that there is a difference between students of different universities in the assessment of additional knowledge that they still need in the field of language. Hypothesis H21 cannot be confirmed.

Table 21. The Difference in the Assessment of Additional Knowledge They Still Need in the Field of Language Between Students From Different Universities

University	N	Average	St. Deviation	Median	Kruskal-Wallis test	
					H	p
University of Ljubljana	90	3.22	.761	3.00		
University of Maribor	120	3.28	.935	3.00	1.936	.380
University of Primorska	25	3.52	.823	3.00		

H22: There is a correlation between the assessment of how important knowledge is for the formation of linguistically correct written texts and for the self-assessment of competence in it when working in kindergarten.

As can be seen from Table 22, the value of Spearman's correlation coefficient between the assessment of how important knowledge is for the formation of linguistically correct written texts and for the self-assessment of competence in it at work in kindergarten is 0.258, which represents a positive and weak correlation and which is also statistically significant ($p < .001$). Therefore, we can say that students who find it more important to be able to create linguistically correct written texts also feel more qualified to create linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten. Thus, the hypothesis H22 can be confirmed.

Table 22. The Correlation Between the Assessment of the Importance of Knowledge About Writing Linguistically Correct Texts and the Self-Assessment of this Competence

		How qualified do you feel to create linguistically correct written texts for work in a kindergarten?
How important do you think it is to be able to form linguistically correct written texts?	Spearman's Corr. Coeff.	.258
	p	< .001
	N	236

H23: There is a correlation between the assessment of how important it is to master the appropriate literary expression and the self-assessment of the ability to use it at work in kindergarten.

As can be seen from Table 23, the value of Spearman's correlation coefficient between the assessment of how important it is to master the relevant literary expression and the self-assessment of the ability to use it at work in kindergarten is 0.342, which represents a positive and medium strong correlation which is also statistically significant ($p < .001$). Therefore, we can say that students who find it more important to master the appropriate literary expression also feel more qualified to use the appropriate literary expression when working in kindergarten. Thus, the hypothesis H23 can be confirmed.

Table 23. The Correlation Between the Assessment of the Importance of Using Standard Language when Speaking and the Self-Assessment of this Competence

		How qualified do you feel to use the appropriate literary expression when working in kindergarten?
How important do you think it is to master an appropriate literary expression?	Spearman's Corr. Coeff.	.342
	p	< .001
	N	236

Discussion

In this paper we start from the hypothesis that the opinion of future educators regarding language as one of the core areas in the kindergarten curriculum has a significant impact on children's perception of their first/native tongue and their linguistic and communicative development, as well as on the so-called "transfer power" of example on the way to efficient communication of children in different speaking situations. A large majority of future kindergarten educators consider their positive attitude towards language in general to be extremely important for kindergarten children, as

language forms the basis for all other curriculum areas. Our findings are also in line with the research of Pečnik (2023) who, also found that this relationship is very important, based on a sample of 100 educators. Also, almost all respondents (future educators) believe that it is necessary to master the language because they represent the first point of contact of children with the educational environment, and that they encourage the development of language in children by their own example. Pečnik (2023) comes to a similar conclusion and states that the majority of the teachers surveyed (N = 100) feel sufficiently qualified to carry out activities in the field of language. Petek (2021) also confirms the conclusion that children should be encouraged to use language by their own example. Based on a sample of 219 teachers, Drnovšek (2021) found that teachers need to be linguistically competent in order to provide quality teaching.

Furthermore, the students in our survey also believe it to be significant or very significant to have well-developed linguistic ability (language knowledge), to be able to create linguistically accurate written texts and to master a suitable literary expression. Our results are in line with a study undertaken by Skubic (2017), which showed similar results in a sample of 81 educators.

More than half of future educators often, or very often, think about linguistic correctness while creating written and spoken texts. Slightly more than half of future educators believe that they feel well qualified to create linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten, and slightly less than half feel their knowledge is very good or excellent. Drnovšek (2021) also reached a similar conclusion.

However, more than half of future educators feel sufficiently trained to use the appropriate literary expression when working in kindergarten, and just under half feel their knowledge is very good or excellent. Our results are consistent with those of Levičnik (2019), who conducted a study on a sample of 69 educators. The results are also similar to a study on classroom teachers with a sample of 86 teachers, which was conducted by Indjić (2022).

According to our study, slightly less than half of future educators create written texts using different types of text 'fairly often', and a good third of them create them 'often' or 'very often', while a little less than half of future educators create spoken texts using different types of text 'fairly often', and in a similar proportion the response was 'often' or 'very often'. More than half of the students self-assessed themselves and considered themselves as being 'good' in creating linguistically correct written texts, while a third believed they were 'very good' or 'excellent'. Regarding the use of the appropriate literary expression, less than two thirds self-assessed themselves as 'good', and a similar proportion as either 'very good' or 'excellent'. Two thirds of students believe that the work of an educator requires continuous professional development in the field of language, and most also believe that the renewal and improvement of knowledge in the field of language is either important or very important. Just under half of students believe that they need a lot of additional knowledge in the field of language. Most of them wrote that they need additional knowledge in the field of text types (writing invitations, notices and minutes etc.), followed by the fields of orthoepy and verbal performance, and then by the field of orthography and the creation of linguistically correct written texts. Some, to a lesser extent, would like to be educated in the fields of morphology and syntax in the future. Petek (2019) and Kos (2018), among others, have also confirmed our findings regarding the need for further and advanced language training for educators.

The results obtained through various statistical procedures to determine the differences between the opinions of 1st and 3rd year students regarding language are also encouraging. In almost all cases, students in every school year progressed in language awareness in kindergarten, as they showed statistically significant differences in favour of 3rd year students. However, there were no statistically significant differences between students of individual universities, which is understandable as all publicly recognised programs are equal in quality and content. However, we also found that there is a correlation between the assessment of how important knowledge is in creating linguistically correct written texts and the self-assessment of competence for this when working in kindergarten. Students who find it more important to be able to create linguistically correct written texts also feel more qualified to create linguistically correct written texts for work in kindergarten. Similarly, there is a correlation between the assessment of how important it is to master an appropriate literary expression and the self-assessment of the ability to use it at work in the kindergarten. Students who find it more important to master the appropriate literary expression also feel more qualified to use the appropriate literary expression when working in a kindergarten.

Conclusion

The field of language used in the kindergarten is one of the fundamental curricular areas in which the educator must be adequately empowered to set an example for children, while at the same time developing their communicative ability. Using a quantitative study, we have achieved the purpose and objectives of this research which were to investigate future kindergarten teachers' views on the role of language and to substantiate, through theoretical insights and empirical findings, a basic assumption of future kindergarten teachers. This basic assumption being that the perception of language is one of the core areas of the kindergarten curriculum and has a significant impact on a child's perception of their mother tongue and their linguistic and communicative development. It has also revealed the importance of the so-called "transfer performance of example" and the way it affects a child's (later) efficiency in communication in different speaking situations. According to the established opinion of future educators on the importance of language in kindergarten, we can conclude that with their mentality, their actions and empowerment in the field of language, they will actually have a positive impact on children in kindergarten, and represent an important influence on a child's perception of his/her

mother tongue and his/her language development. They will also have a positive impact on the development of communicative ability, as well as on the so-called transfer power on the way to (later) effective communication of children in different speaking situations. Educators must also be able to continue their education and training according to their own identified deficits in terms of lifelong learning. This is also supported by the European Union as part of the effort to provide quality education and training, especially for pedagogical workers who pass on their knowledge and experience to young generations, as educators primarily teaching by their own example, which children in kindergartens learn mostly through imitation.

Recommendations

The recommendation for further research could lie in the direction that our author's questionnaire could be completed by future educators in several European countries with comparable pre-school education programs, so that we could gain an insight into the opinion of future educators about the use of language in other countries. The same questionnaire could be completed by respondents who have already finished their education in other countries. This would give us a new level of opinion comparison. Research with a survey-based questionnaire could also be upgraded with direct participation in the actual environment of the kindergarten, whereby we could observe the implementation of the discussed items in practice. Language is one of the core kindergarten curriculum areas in which the educator needs to be adequately empowered to set an example for children. When kindergarten teachers begin their work in kindergarten, we recommend lifelong training in the field of language so that they can justify their role in teaching children. Further education and training in this area will be necessary. We suggest that they pay attention to the following areas in their teaching: (a) they must support the theoretical foundations they have acquired during their studies and put them into practice; (b) that direct professional experience is the main factor in producing the best possible practical competence; (c) they must constantly review the knowledge they believe they should acquire or improve on; (d) they must look critically at their work and constantly improve their practice; (e) they must have a clear plan on how to improve their work and (f) they must be aware that they are a role model for the children they are teaching.

Limitations

The limitation of the research is the fact that it is a sample. For even more credible results and the possibility of generalising them to a base set, then the number of respondents would have to be doubled, but this poses a problem because education at faculty level in the Republic of Slovenia is only undertaken at three public universities where student numbers are limited and are similar to those provided in our sample. As with all survey-based questionnaires, our main problem is the credibility or actual reality of the answers; it is common knowledge that respondents usually provide expected/desired answers which do not necessarily reflect the actual/real situation.

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