

A Comparative Analysis of Children's Identity in Multilingual Settings in Two Distinct Areas of Southern Poland

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Abstract

The functioning of attitudes in multilingual settings has always evoked interest of researches (for example, Dewaele and Li, 2020). Nonetheless, there is still a gap concerning the knowledge about how the process is shaped in the early stages of life. The present paper is about to explore the attitudes of primary school children towards Polish, English, and regional dialect in two distinct areas of southern Poland. The main purpose is to investigate the following issues (i) how the status and the feeling of belonging are reflected in children's responses, (ii) what their approach is in terms of learning languages (iii) to what extent social desirability influences their views. The study was conducted among two groups of primary school children, aged 7, 8, and 9. The data was gathered in reference to an interview with the students conducted in Polish. Children's voices were recorded for their subsequent transcription. Findings depict how the status and the sense of belonging are different in each examined area, and how the emotional attachment to dialectal tradition may be rooted in children's minds. In addition, the outcomes cleared out how children's attitudes are being formed in multilingual environments, and whether school has a visible influence on those attitudes.

Keywords: multilingual, social setting, attitude, identity, children

Streszczenie

Analiza porównawcza tożsamości dzieci w środowiskach wielojęzycznych na dwóch odrębnych obszarach Polski południowej

Funkcjonowanie postaw w środowisku wielojęzycznym od zawsze stanowiło pole zainteresowania wśród wielu badaczy (np. Dewaele i Li, 2020). Niewiele jest jednak informacji związanej z tym, jak ten proces jest kształtowany na wczesnych etapach życia. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu charakterystykę postaw uczniów szkoły podstawowej w stosunku do języka polskiego, angielskiego oraz dialektu regionalnego. Co więcej, zbadano (i) w jaki sposób status

i poczucie przynależności znajdują odzwierciedlenie w reakcjach dzieci, (ii) jakie jest ich podejście do nauki języków, (iii) w jakim stopniu społeczeństwo wpływa na ich poglądy. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w dwóch grupach uczniów szkoły podstawowej w wieku 7, 8, oraz 9 lat. Dane zostały zgromadzone w oparciu o metodę wywiadu, który przeprowadzono w języku polskim. Głosy dzieci zarejestrowano w celu opracowania późniejszej transkrypcji. Wyniki badania obrazują jak status i poczucie przynależności do regionu wpływają na emocjonalnie przywiązane do języka oraz wyjaśniają rolę placówki w kształtowaniu postaw uczniów w środowisku wielojęzycznym.

Słowa kluczowe: wielojęzyczność, otoczenie, nastawienie, tożsamość, dzieci

1. Introduction

There is no denying that in today's globalized world, the influence of multilingualism (cf. Tucker 1999; Valdes 2012; Paradowski 2016; Jayanath 2021) on the contemporary communities is becoming increasingly noticeable. Each society is no longer homogenous, and the language utilized serves as a tool to express either culture or people's individuality. The language serves as a medium via which one's sense of self is expressed and connected to other forms of communication, including language, dialects, sociolects, and multimodality. The language is perceived as a social activity that both shapes and is shaped by various connections, hence influencing one's sense of self. Due to the various roles that language learners/users might assume in social interactions, identity is formed as manifold, susceptible to alteration, and a battleground (Gabryś-Barker 2019; cf. King 2018).

Block (2014) states that learners and language users engage in various learning environments where they actively place themselves and are also influenced by external factors. Learners are able to create and discuss numerous identities through language, which helps them reshape their connections. What is more, a student who is extremely driven to acquire a language may yet have little interest or commitment to the language practices of a certain classroom or community. These language practices may reflect distinct value systems from the learner's own. While motivation plays a significant role, it is the personal investment, defined as a deep connection between a learner's desire and dedication to language learning, that contributes to the development of one's intricate personality. Furthermore, an expansion of curiosity in one's sense of self and commitment pertains to the conceptualized communities that language learners may strive to become a part of when acquiring a new language (Norton 2001; cf. Anderson 1991). Thus, it is worth mentioning some theories that shed light on different aspects of language learning. The first one is Linguistic Identity Theory, which examines the influence of language on the formation of both individual and collective identities. This idea

suggests that the languages we use, together with the different forms or versions of those languages, play a role in shaping our individual identity and our sense of belonging to a certain community. Language serves as an indicator of one's identity, which is shaped by sociocultural circumstances, power relations, and historical events. It also examines how individuals employ language to conform to, oppose, or reinvent collective identities (Norton 2013). The next one is Social Identity Theory (SIT), which was initially formed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979. It centers on the influence of social groupings in the process of shaping one's identity. It indicates that individuals obtain a portion of their sense of self from the social collectives they are affiliated with, which may encompass language communities. The theory elucidates the impact of in-group and out-group dynamics on social behavior, attitudes, and language usage (Tajfel and Turner 2004). There are also theories of language acquisition that investigate the process by which humans develop the capacity to perceive, generate, and comprehend language. This phenomenon has been thoroughly examined from multiple viewpoints, leading to the development of several significant theories. The following are the primary theories of language acquisition:

- The Nativist Theory, put forth by Noam Chomsky, asserts that humans possess an inherent capacity to acquire language from birth. Chomsky proposed the notion of Universal Grammar (UG), which encompasses a collection of grammatical concepts that are common to all languages. He proposes that children possess a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) that empowers them to swiftly acquire the principles of language from the restricted input they get.
- Social Interactionist Theory highlights the significance of social interaction and communication in the process of acquiring language. Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner are prominent protagonists in this idea, suggesting that the acquisition of language is motivated by the necessity for social interaction. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a key idea that proposes that children acquire linguistic skills by engaging in supervised interactions with others who possess greater knowledge.
- The Cognitive Theory of language acquisition, attributed to Jean Piaget, posits that language learning is an integral component of overall cognitive development. According to this view, the process of acquiring language is closely linked to a child's total cognitive development, namely their capacity to comprehend and classify the world. Language development coincides with the maturation of cognitive ability.

- Usage-Based Theories, advocated by Michael Tomasello, suggest that language acquisition is grounded in overarching cognitive processes such as pattern recognition, memory, and comparison. Language acquisition takes place when infants are exposed to and actively participate in language within a specific context, progressively developing their understanding based on the frequency and purpose of language usage in their environment.
- Connectionist Theories claim that language acquisition transpires by the progressive establishment of connections between words and concepts in the brain, similar to a neural network. Learning is perceived as the process of enhancing these connections by firsthand experience, rather than just applying predefined rules.

As multilingualism is comprehended as a normal human state since people “(...) need to reassert it, and to implement it in practical ways (...)” (Crystal 2006: 409), it seems crucial to be able to speak many languages. According to King (2018), dialects can be treated as an independent language due to the fact that “multilingualism refers to the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one ‘variety of language’ i.e. the mode of speaking of a social group whether it is formally recognized as a language or not” (King, 2018: 8; cf. Williams 2015). Multilingualism is a complex phenomenon which may also cause the problem of identity in multilingual setting. Taking into consideration linguistics, sociocultural theory, and critical discourse studies it is possible to define and to examine different issues. Individuals who can speak many languages may experience issues related to their identity when their languages are assigned varying levels of importance within a culture. These hierarchies might compel individuals to give precedence to one language over another, potentially resulting in language attrition or assimilation pressures, which can undermine cultural identities (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). The next issue is bilingualism vs. biculturalism. Bilingualism may not necessarily imply biculturalism. While certain people who are bilingual may have a sense of belonging in both cultures, others may experience a divided sense of self, not fully assimilated into either culture (Grosjean 2010). This can lead to the development of a hybrid identity, which can serve as both a source of resilience and inner turmoil. Another aspect is language policy, which at the national level frequently exerts a substantial influence on the formation of identity. Enforcing policies that advocate for a sole official language at the national level can lead to the exclusion and disregard of minority languages, thereby undermining the associated cultural and linguistic identities (Spolsky 2004). On the other hand, policies that promote multilingualism can strengthen the sense of belonging and cultural heritage of

individuals who speak minority languages, so promoting a society that is more accepting and inclusive.

One of the first settings that may contribute to the development of multilingualism among children might be classroom environment since learners have an opportunity to expand a multilingual identity, which can be called an ‘umbrella’ identity, where they can not only consciously identify themselves with the linguistic repertoire a particular language has (Fisher et al. 2018: 448-449), but also express their attitudes towards the usage of a language (Amin 2020: 27 cf. Garrett, 2010).

The phenomenon of functioning attitudes in multilingual settings has constituted the base for studies among many researchers (for example, Dewaele and Li, 2020). Nevertheless, there is still not much information on how the process is shaped in the early stages of life. Thus, some obvious questions arise in respect to the topic: how the status and the feeling of belonging are reflected in children’s responses; what their approach is in terms of learning languages; and to what extent social desirability influences their language attitudes.

2. The current study

In the current study, we compare the children’s attitudes towards English, Polish and the Polish dialect on the basis of the data collected from two different areas in the southern part of Poland, mainly, Męcina and Obidowa. Męcina is a village situated in the administrative district of Limanowa in the Małopolska province. Obidowa is a village situated in in the administrative district of Nowy Targ in the Małopolska province. The dialect typical for Męcina is called *Lachowski dialect*¹, whereas the dialect characteristic for Obidowa is called *Podhale dialect*². For the purpose of this study, each dialect is treated as an independent language. In addition, our main objective is to gather the information in relation to the above mentioned questions, primarily, how the status and the feeling of belonging are reflected in children’s responses; what their approach is in terms of learning languages; and to what extent social desirability influences their language attitudes. This is achieved by addressing the following issues in each category:

¹ ‘Lachowski dialect/ vernacular’ is characteristic for the area from Nowy Sącz to Limanowa and from Łukowica to Rytro.

² Podhale dialect is a dialect spoken by highlanders (*górale*) in the area from Gorce Mountains, Tatras, Białka River, and European watershed.

A. The status and the feeling of belonging

1. Which language do you prefer: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Który język wolisz, język polski, język angielski czy dialekt*)
2. Which language do you mostly use at home: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Którego z języków używasz najczęściej w domu, języka polskiego, język angielskiego czy dialektu?*)
3. Which language do you mostly use at school: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Którego z języków używasz najczęściej w szkole, języka polskiego, język angielskiego czy dialektu?*)
4. Which language do you mostly use when you talk with friends: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Którego z języków używasz najczęściej w trakcie rozmowy z kolegami i koleżankami, języka polskiego, język angielskiego czy dialektu?*)
5. Which language do you identify yourself with: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Z którym z języków się identyfikujesz, z językiem polskim, z językiem angielskim czy z dialektem?*)

B. Approach to language learning

1. Which language is easier for you: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Który z języków jest dla Ciebie najłatwiejszy język polski, język angielski czy dialekt?*)
2. What do you consider the easiest in learning Polish? (Polish *Co jest dla Ciebie najłatwiejsze w języku polskim?*)
3. What do you consider the easiest in learning English? (Polish *Co jest dla Ciebie najłatwiejsze w języku angielskim?*)
4. What do you consider the easiest in a dialect? (Polish *Co jest dla Ciebie najłatwiejsze w dialekcie?*)

C. Social desirability

1. Which language would you like to speak the most every day: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Jakim językiem chciałbyś mówić przez większość czasu, językiem polskim, językiem angielskim czy dialektem?*)
2. Which language do you have to speak at school: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Jakim językiem musisz mówić w szkole, językiem polskim, językiem angielskim czy dialektem?*)
3. Which language do you have to speak at home: Polish, English, or a dialect? (Polish *Jakim językiem musisz mówić w domu, językiem polskim, językiem angielskim czy dialektem?*)

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted in two areas respectively. The first group consisted of 20 children, aged seven who attended primary school in Męcina. 2 out of 20 students lived in the UK for 5-6 years (they had lived there since their birth till they were 5/6 years old). The second group consisted of 22 students, aged 7, 8, and 9 who attended primary school in Obidowa. None of the students lived in an English speaking country.

The number of students taking part in the research might appear to be not substantial enough; nevertheless, it was sufficient to draw some essential conclusions.

2.2. Materials and procedure

The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in Polish due to the fact that the participants were not fluent enough in English to answer all the questions thoroughly. Each interview consisted of up to 5 questions per category. Children's responses were voice recorded by an integrated microphone (Galaxy tab S8) for their subsequent transcription. The answers in a particular category were narrowed to the selection of three options: Polish, English (British English), and a dialect. Other varieties of English were not taken into consideration. Only question 1 within category A was a one-choice answer. Both of the researches were carried out in a classroom environment with the assistance of a local teacher.

2.3. A comparative analysis and results

2.3.1. *The status and the feeling of belonging*

S1. Which language do you prefer Polish, English, or a dialect?

In summary, a large proportion of the surveyed students in Męcina showed their preference towards English (17) rather than other languages (Polish, a dialect). Only 2 students claimed to like Polish, and 1 student chose a dialect (Figure 1).

On the other hand, the majority of survey participants in Obidowa preferred a dialect (14) over the other languages (Polish, and English). Six students selected the option English, and only 2 the option Polish.

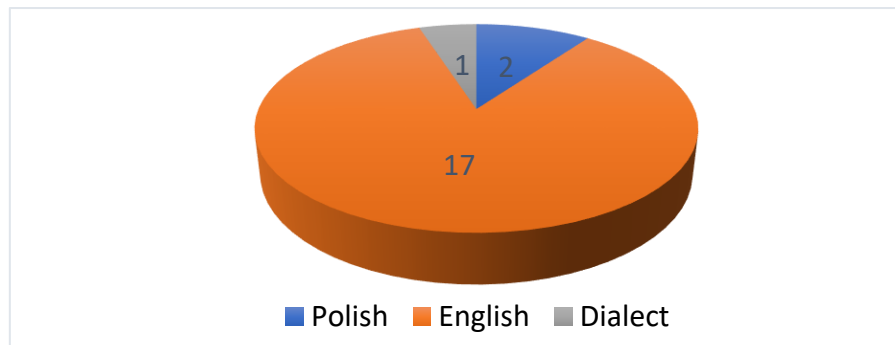


Figure 1. The number of responses to question 1, *Which language do you prefer: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

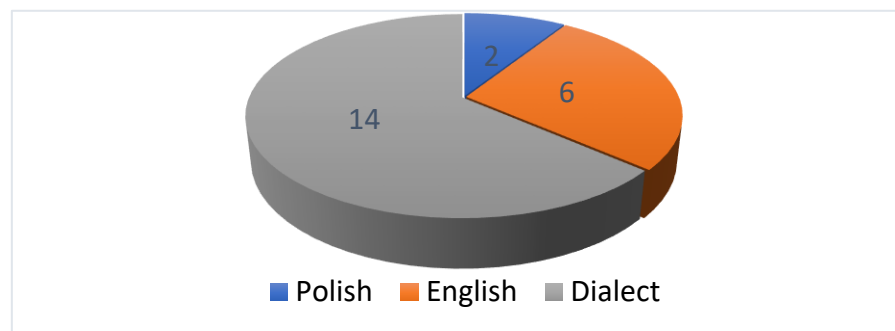


Figure 2. The number of responses to question 1, *Which language do you prefer: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

Figures 3-8 illustrate the number of students' responses concerning the usage of each language in the following environments: 1) school (Figure 3 and 4); 2) home (Figure 5 and 6); and 3) while communicating with friends (Figure 7 and 8) accordingly.

In case of Męcina, the students reported to utilize Polish (20 students) and a dialect (18 students) at home; only 2 students opted for English. The languages used at school were Polish (20 students) and English (20 students); only 5 students selected a dialect. The languages which were the most frequently employed while communicating with friends were Polish (18 students) and a dialect (8 students); only 4 students employed English.

Nonetheless, in Obidowa, the students reported to use a dialect (22 students) and Polish (20 students) at home; none of the survey participants indicated English. In case of school environment, the students admitted to using Polish and a dialect (22 students); 10 students decided to point at English. Referring to question 4, students claimed to employ only Polish and a dialect (22 students) while talking with friends; none of the survey participants chose the answer English.

S2. Which language do you mostly use at home: Polish, English, or a dialect?

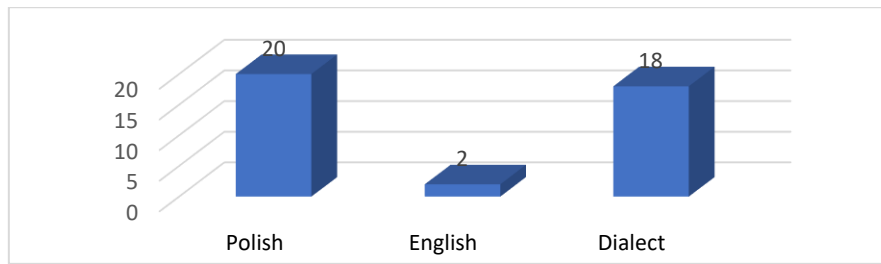


Figure 3. The number of responses to question 2, *Which language do you mostly use at home: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

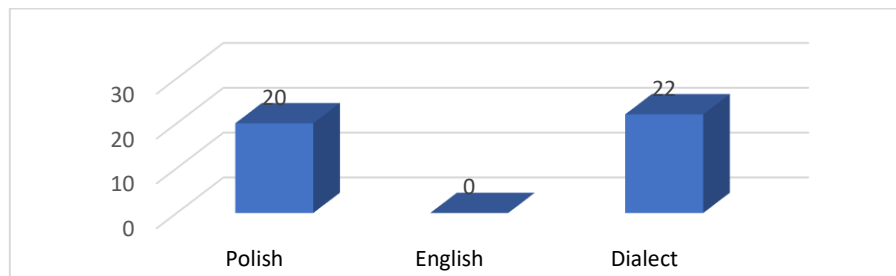


Figure 4. The number of responses to question 2, *Which language do you mostly use at home: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

S3. Which language do you mostly use at school: Polish, English, or a dialect?

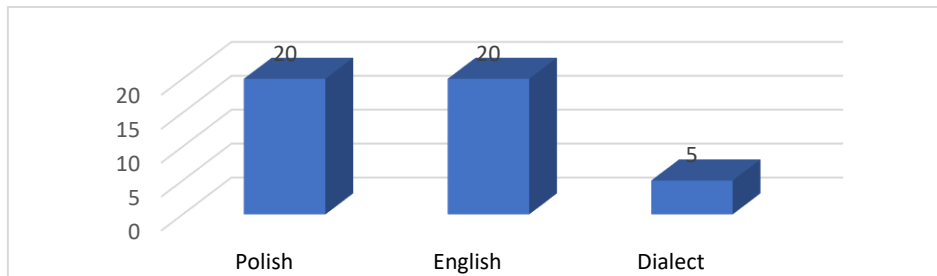


Figure 5. The number of responses to question 3, *Which language do you mostly use at school: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

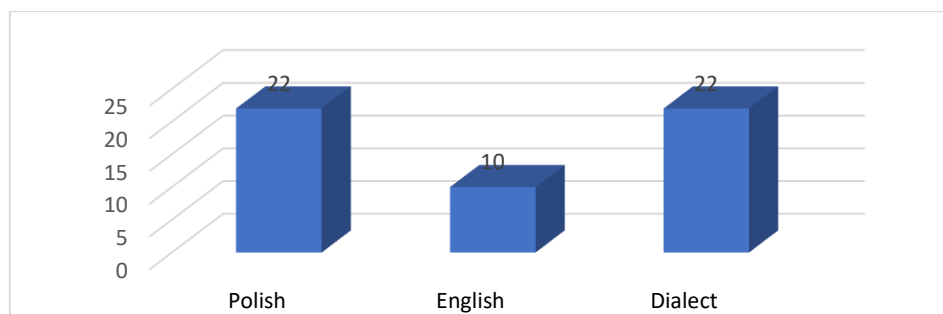


Figure 6. The number of responses to question 3, *Which language do you mostly use at school: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

S4. Which language do you mostly use when you talk with friends: Polish, English, or a dialect?

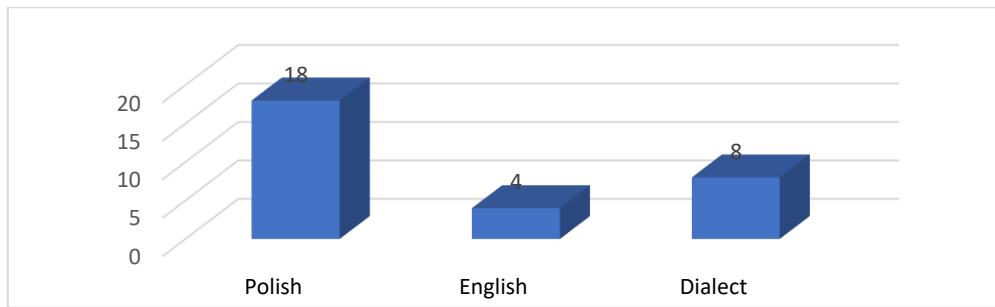


Figure 7. The number of responses to question 4, *Which language do you mostly use when you talk with friends: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

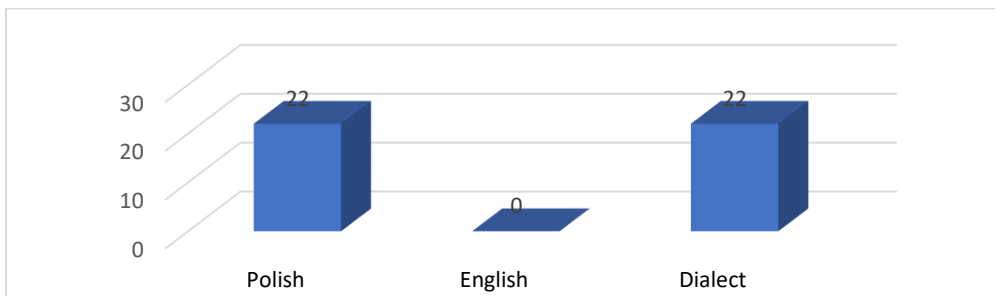


Figure 8. The number of responses to question 4, *Which language do you mostly use when you talk with friends: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

Figures 9 and 10 depict the proportion of students' responses connected with language identification.

In Męcina, students pointed at English (18 choices). Polish, and a dialect were chosen by 8 and 2 students, respectively.

In Obidowa, the respondents opted for a dialect (20 students) at the first place. Polish, and English were selected by 8 and 2 students, respectively.

S5. Which language do you identify yourself with: Polish, English, or a dialect?

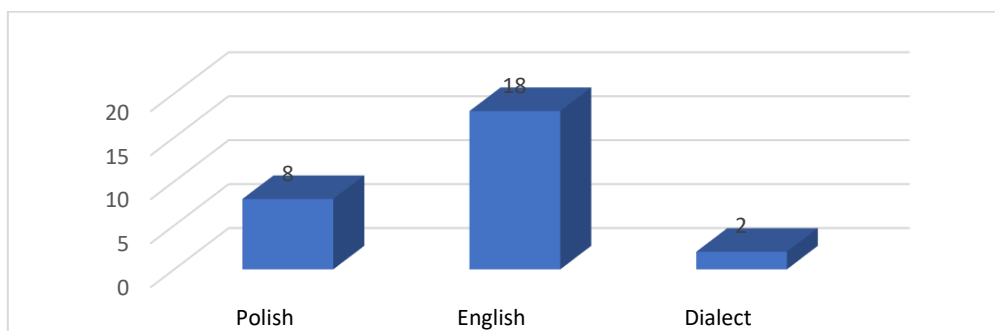


Figure 9. The number of responses to question 5, *Which language do you identify yourself with: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

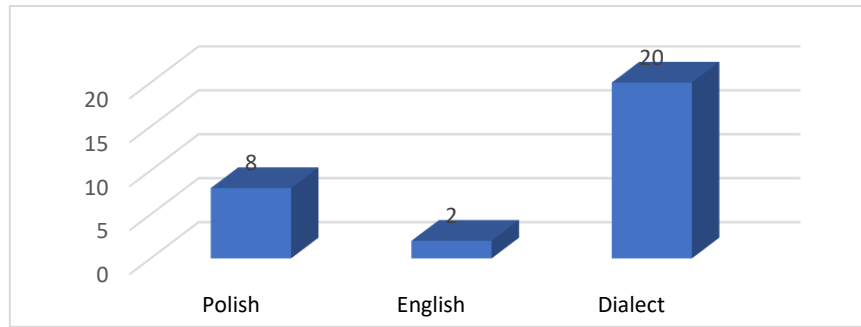


Figure 10. The number of responses to question 5, *Which language do you identify yourself with: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

2.3.2. Approach to language learning

S1. Which language is easier for you: Polish, English, or a dialect?

In brief, in Męcina the students admitted that all languages were equally easy to acquire (Figure 11). Nevertheless, in Obidowa, it was the dialect that appeared to be the easiest (22 students) in comparison to other languages (Polish – 12 choices; English – 5 choices).

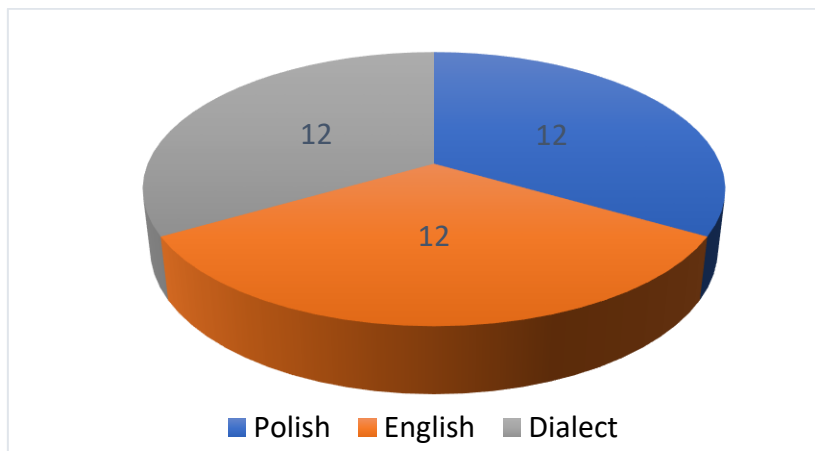


Figure 11. The number of responses to question 1, *Which language is easier for you: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

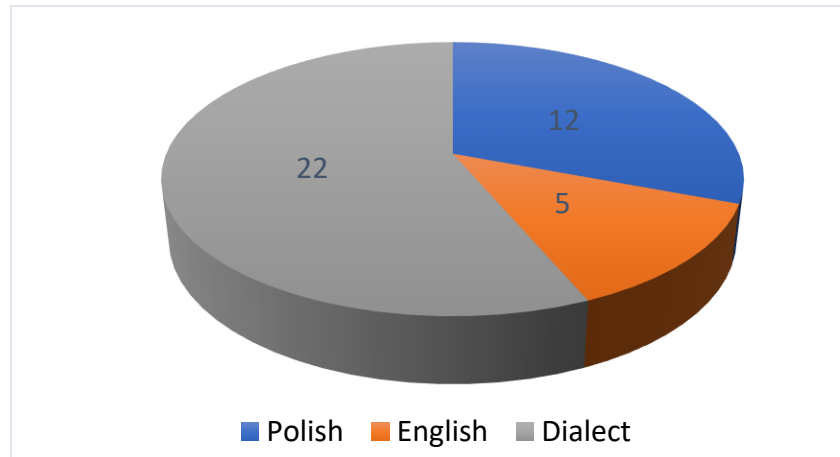


Figure 12. The number of responses to question 1, *Which language is easier for you: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

Figures 13- 18 depict what language spheres are considered easy for the survey participants in each language domain.

In Męcina, the students perceived the following spheres as the easiest: 1) in Polish, those were alphabet (15 choices), singing songs (11 choices), describing a house (10 choices), and talking about family (8 choices); 2) in English, those were primarily singing songs (18 choices), playing (17 choices), vocabulary (15 choices), alphabet (11 choices), and numbers (10 choices); and 3) in a dialect, those were vocabulary (15 choices) and accent (2 choices).

In Obidowa, the respondents acknowledged the following spheres as the easiest: 1) in Polish, those were alphabet (10 choices), singing songs (10 choices), describing seasons (10 choices), talking about relatives (10 choices), and storytelling (10 choices); 2) in English, those were primarily singing songs (21 choices), vocabulary (20 choices), names for family members (11 choices), playing (10 choices), and numbers (10 choices); and 3) in a dialect, those were vocabulary (22 choices) and accent (18 choices).

S2. What do you consider the easiest in learning Polish?

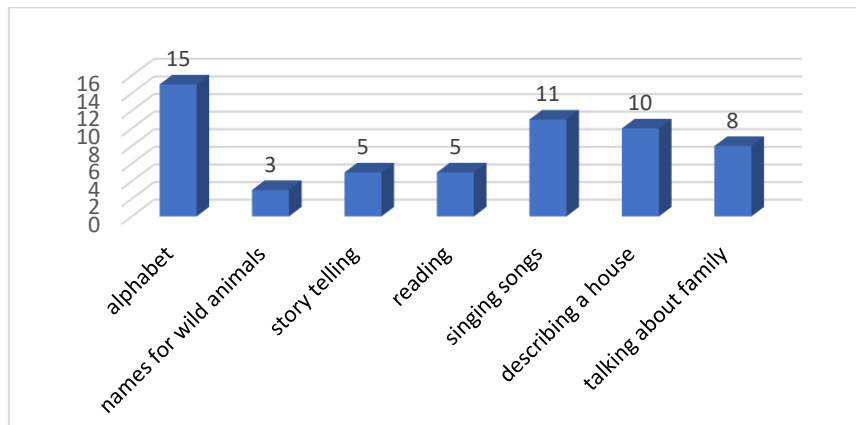


Figure 13. The number of responses to question 2, *What do you consider the easiest in learning Polish?*, in Męcina

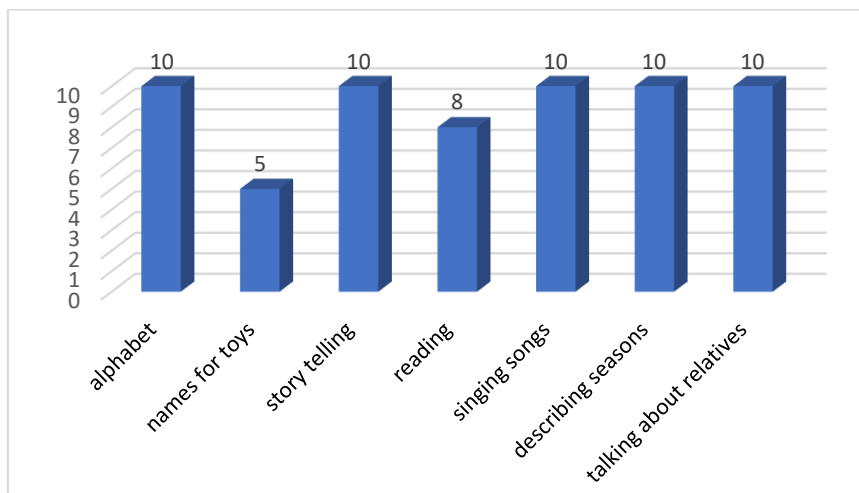


Figure 14. The number of responses to question 2, *What do you consider the easiest in learning Polish?*, in Obidowa

S3. What do you consider the easiest in learning English?

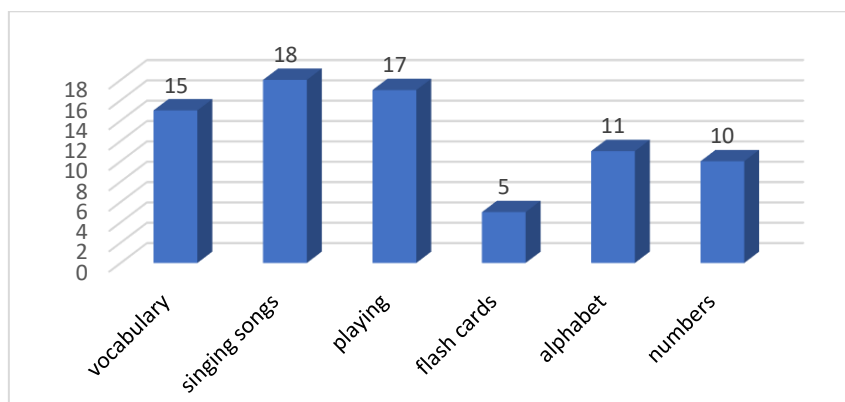


Figure 15. The number of responses to question 3, *What do you consider the easiest in learning English?*, in Męcina

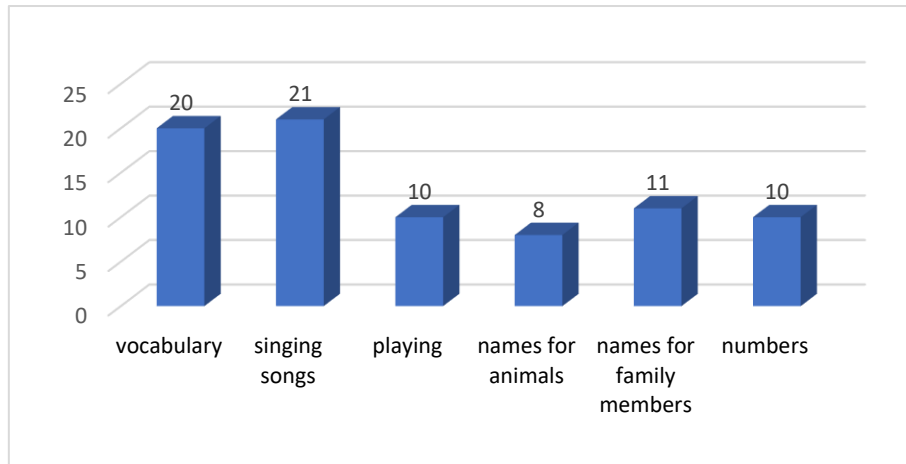


Figure 16. The number of responses to question 3, *What do you consider the easiest in learning English?*, in Obidowa

S4. *What do you consider the easiest in a dialect?*

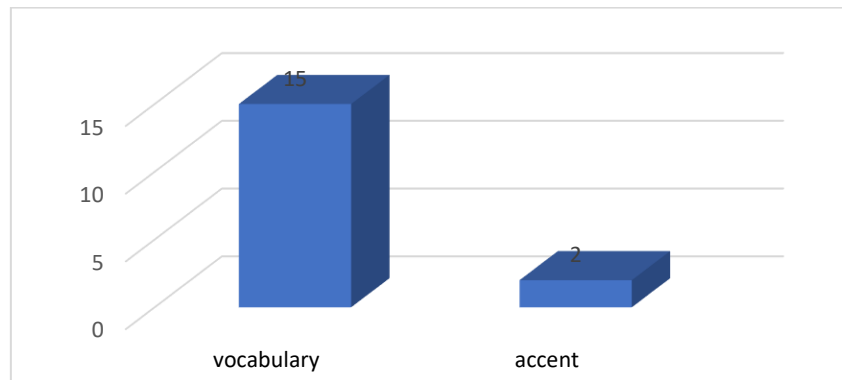


Figure 17. The number of responses to question 4, *What do you consider the easiest in a dialect?*, in Męcina

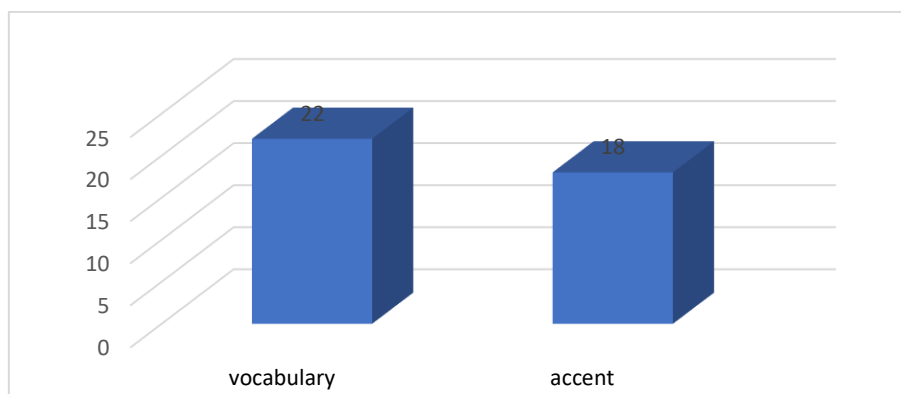


Figure 18. The number of responses to question 4, *What do you consider the easiest in a dialect?*, in Obidowa

2.3.3. Social desirability

As shown in Figures 19-24, the students' preference concerning the choice of a particular language strictly hinges on the environment.

In Męcina, the students were willing to utilize English (20 students) over Polish (13 students) and a dialect (2 students). At school, they had to employ either Polish (20 students) or English (20 students). At home, they had to employ Polish (20 students) or a dialect (16 students) over English (2 students).

In Obidowa, the respondents preferred to employ a dialect (22 students) over Polish (15 students) and English (5 students). At school, they had to utilize Polish (22 students) and English (22 students) instead of a dialect (0 students). At home, they had to use a dialect (22 students) as opposed to Polish (5 students) and English (5 students).

S1 Which language would you like to speak the most every day: Polish, English, or a dialect?

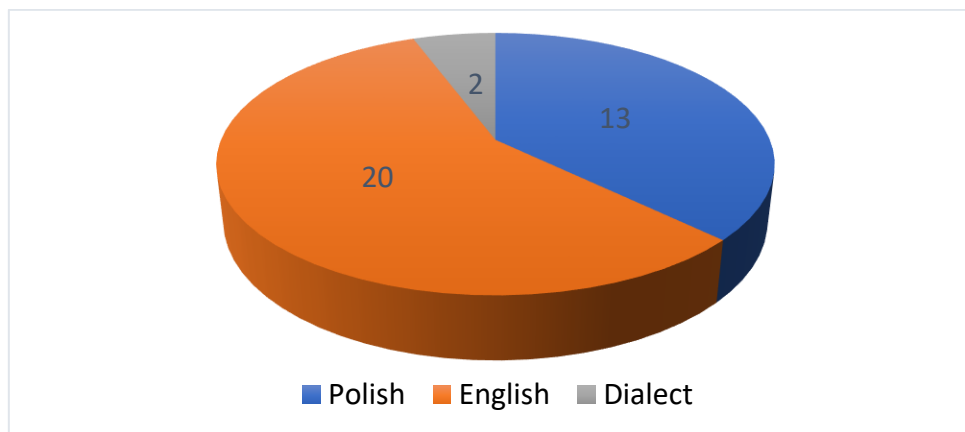


Figure 19. The number of responses to question 1, *Which language would you like to speak the most every day: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

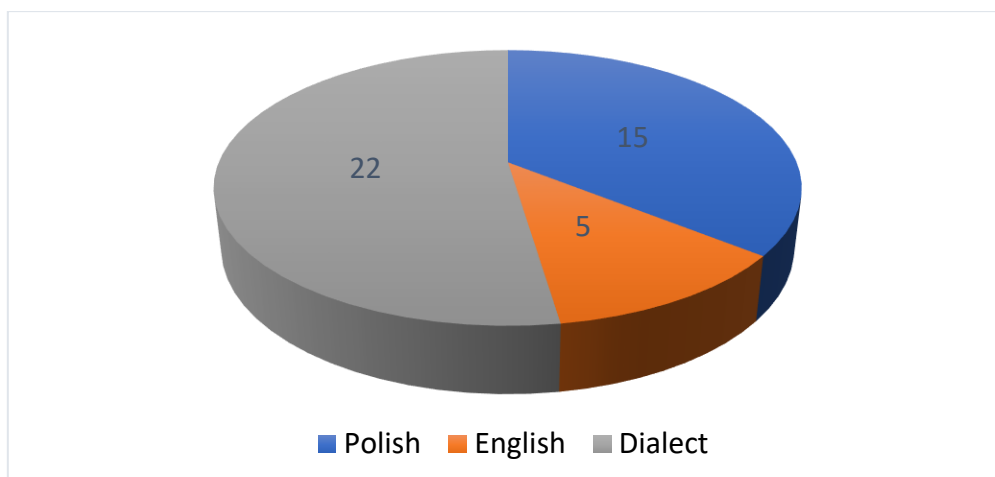


Figure 20. The number of responses to question 1, *Which language would you like to speak the most every day: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

S2. Which language do you have to speak at school: Polish, English, or a dialect?

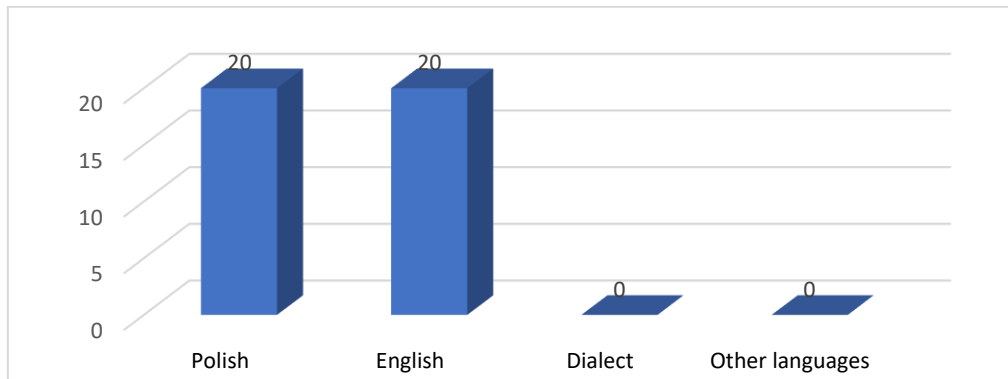


Figure 21. The number of responses to question 2, *Which language do you have to speak at school: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

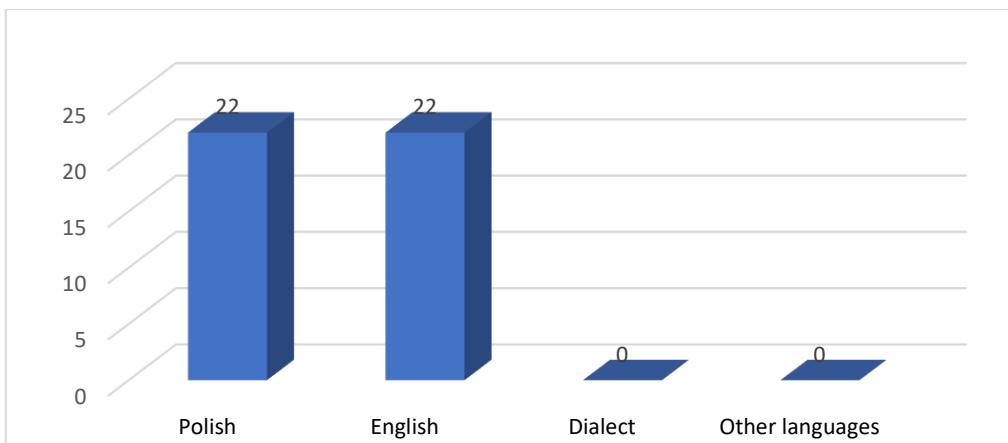


Figure 22. The number of responses to question 2, *Which language do you have to speak at school: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

S3. Which language do you have to speak at home: Polish, English, or a dialect?

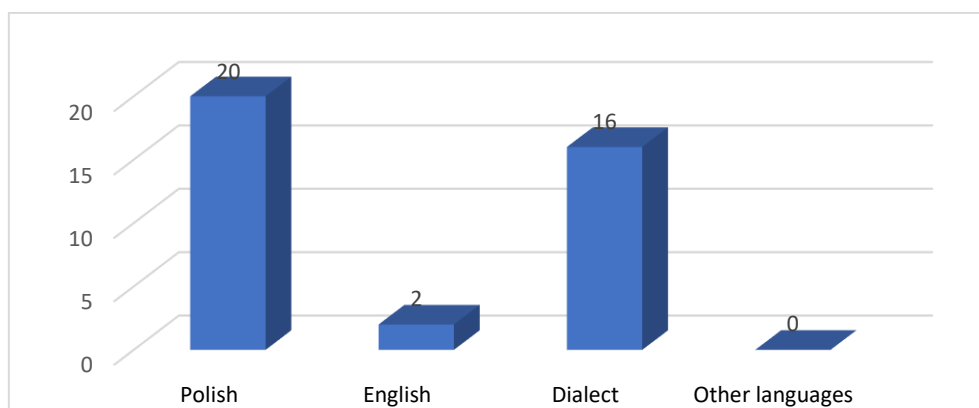


Figure 23. The number of responses to question 3, *Which language do you have to speak at home: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Męcina

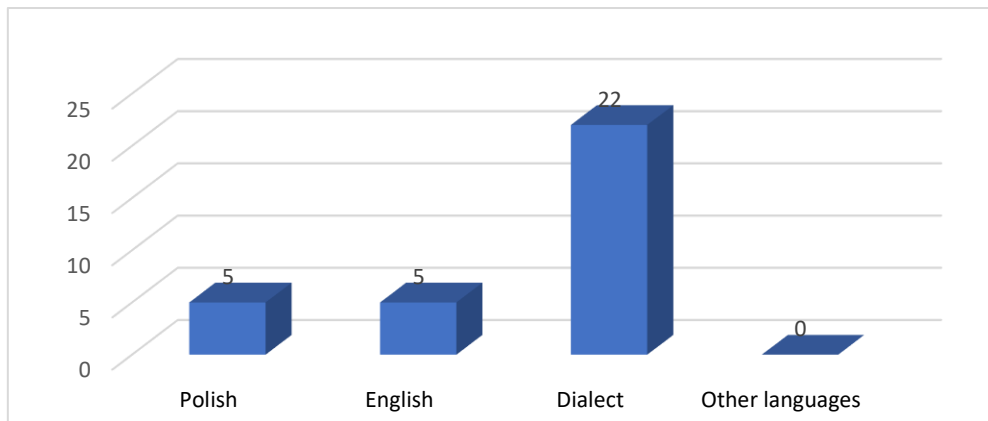


Figure 24. The number of responses to question 3, *Which language do you have to speak at home: Polish, English, or a dialect?*, in Obidowa

3. Discussion

The scrutiny of the collected data facilitates addressing the previously formulated research questions.

How are the status and the feeling of belonging reflected in children's responses?

The status and the feeling of belonging are reflected in a following way:

in Męcina:

- the majority of students favour English (17) over Polish (2);
- the majority of students use Polish (20) and dialect (18) alternately at home;
- the language utilized at school are mostly English (20) and Polish (20)
- the majority of students communicate with friends using Polish (18) and a dialect (8)

however,

- they identify more with English (18) than with other researched languages (10)

in Obidowa:

- the majority of students favour dialect (14) over Polish (2) and English (6);
- the majority of students use dialect (22) or Polish (20) at home, Polish (22) and dialect (22) at school and while talking with friends;
- the students tend to identify with their regional dialect (20) rather than Polish and English (10).

What is their approach in terms of learning languages?

Students' approach in terms of learning languages is the following:

in Męcina:

- the same number of participants (12) claim that all of the languages are equally easy to acquire;
- their approach to each of the languages is visible via the elements that they consider easy.

Hence, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The English setting appeared to be the most interesting, considering the number of participants (76) and the elements they mentioned (7).
2. The Polish setting is less interesting since fewer students (57) gave examples of the elements that are easy;
3. It is difficult to determine the learning approach towards dialects as the students were only able to name two aspects.

in Obidowa:

- a dialect (22) and Polish (12) are the easiest to acquire;
- their approach towards each language is reflected via the elements they considered easy.

Hence:

1. The dialectal setting seems to be the most interesting despite the fact that all the students were able to name only two aspects of the language;
2. The English setting appears to be fairly interesting (taking into consideration the number of participants (80) and elements they were able to mention (6));
3. The Polish setting seems to be the least interesting despite the number of language spheres mentioned by the students (7).

To what extent does social desirability influence students' views?

Students are influenced in the following way:

in Męcina:

- the majority of participants (20) express the desire to use English on a daily basis
- the school setting imposes the usage of both English (20) and Polish (20) on the students, despite the fact that some Polish lessons are devoted to the issue of dialects
- home setting allows for the usage for all languages interchangeably. The only obstacle may be poor English language skills among parents who still support their children's development of English language competences.

in Obidowa:

- the majority of students (22) express the willingness to utilize dialect on their daily basis;

- the school environment requires the use of both English (22) and Polish (22) even though some Polish lessons should include dialectal elements;
- the home setting imposes the usage of dialect (22) which may serve as the evidence of a strong connection to dialectal tradition

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it appears that the phenomenon of multilingualism is considered a natural state for all the interviewed students. They feel comfortable with speaking all the languages interchangeably. Nevertheless, the fact that they can speak many languages surely influences their identity as their languages are assigned varying levels of importance within a specific culture. While in Męcina the students preferred English over other languages, which was reflected in all the questions mentioned, in Obidowa the surveyed participants clearly pointed at dialect to be the language of choice. Such divergence may be justified by many different social, economic and even geographical conditions. Męcina is a place where many people work abroad, mainly in English-speaking countries, so the pressure is placed on children to speak English fluently. On the other hand, Obidowa cherishes cultural heritage of individuals who speak minority languages, hence the tendencies are to promote a society that is more accepting and inclusive.

Despite the fact that the students' approach in terms of learning languages seems to be similar in both examined places, one may have the impression that the place and participants are the main variables that determine the language choice.

Although it may appear that one of the first settings that may contribute to the development of multilingualism among children is the classroom environment where learners have an opportunity to expand an 'umbrella' identity, the study revealed that, regrettably, school imposes its own policy to employ either Polish or English, neglecting the importance of a dialect.

The present study has shed some light on the phenomenon of attitudes in multilingual settings in the early stages of life. Nevertheless, some more researches should be carried out as in Poland it is a specific region/area that may appear to be the key variable in shaping children's attitudes.

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