

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ „ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ“ - ШТИП
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

UDC 81
UDC 82
UDC 008



ISSN: 2545-3998
DOI: 10.46763/palim

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

МЕЃУНАРОДНО СПИСАНИЕ ЗА ЛИНГВИСТИЧКИ,
КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

PALIMPSEST

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LINGUISTIC,
LITERARY AND CULTURAL RESEARCH

PALMK, VOL X, NO 20, STIP, 2025

ГОД. 10, БР. 20
ШТИП, 2025

VOL. X, NO 20
STIP, 2025

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

Меѓународно списание за лингвистички, книжевни
и културолошки истражувања

PALIMPSEST

International Journal for Linguistic, Literary
and Cultural Research

Год. 10, Бр. 20
Штип, 2025

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DOI:

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The International Scientific Journal “Palimpsest” is issued twice a year in printed form and online at the following website of the web portal of Goce Delcev University in Stip: <http://js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/PAL>
Papers can be submitted and published in the following languages: Macedonian, English, German, French, Russian, Turkish and Italian language.
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MACEDONIAN STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ACROSS REGIONS

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Abstract: This study explores Macedonian students' attitudes to English across three contexts: Skopje, other urban centres, and rural communities. Data were gathered through a questionnaire designed to elicit students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of English in their everyday lives. Responses were subjected to a thematic coding analysis, and combined qualitative insights with quantitative frequency counts. Five broad themes were identified: knowledge and cognitive development, communication and social connectivity, mobility and practical advantages, access to information and opportunities, and identity and language preservation. English was overwhelmingly perceived as a valuable resource, with identity and language preservation and communication and social connectivity being the predominant themes across the three contexts. Regional variation revealed subtle differences: students from rural areas valued communication and social connectivity most, students from Skopje areas were most concerned about identity and language preservation issues, while students from other towns balanced both of these concepts. These findings underscore the dual role of English, both as a gateway to global developments and as a perceived threat to local identity, pointing to the need for language policies that foster both English proficiency and Macedonian language maintenance.

Keywords: *attitudes to English; Macedonian students; thematic analysis; sociolinguistic variation; language preservation.*

1. Introduction

The spread of English as a global language has sparked ongoing debates about its impact on linguistic diversity. Crystal (2003) and Seidlhofer (2011) emphasize that English extends across domains ranging from science and academia to business, media, and international relations, making it central to global communication. For young people in particular, English provides access to global networks, educational opportunities, cultural content and the entertainment industry. At the same time, scholars have noted tensions between the empowering potential of English and its role in marginalizing other languages (Phillipson, 2009).

As in other European contexts, English in North Macedonia is now a prominent part of education, media, youth culture, and daily life (Dimova, 2025; Ćurkova, 2006, 2008). Dimova (2025) documents the growing presence

of English in Macedonian higher education, thus supporting both student and lecturer academic mobility. In cases where instruction is delivered in Macedonian, faculties often offer ESP courses that equip students with specialized English vocabulary for their disciplines (Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2020). Ćurkova (2006) highlights the proliferation of Anglicisms in Macedonian, particularly among youth. These studies suggest that English is both a valuable resource and a challenge, since it provides opportunities, while simultaneously raising questions about the maintenance of Macedonian identity.

In Macedonia, exposure to English is uneven across regions. Students in the capital city, Skopje, are more directly exposed to international flows of information, access to institutions and opportunities. As a result, students in smaller urban centres or rural areas may perceive the influence of English differently from Skopje residents. Therefore, examining regional variation would help us understand how English is positioned within Macedonian society.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating Macedonian students' attitudes to English across three contexts: Skopje, other urban areas, and rural communities. It examines how students perceive both the positive and negative aspects of English in their lives, and how these evaluations differ by region. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What thematic patterns emerge in students' evaluations of English across regions?
2. How do students' positive and negative perceptions of English differ across regional contexts?

2. Literature review

Over the past decades, English has expanded more rapidly than any other language, and this has become a sociolinguistic trend that is still actively in progress. Being widely recognised as a present-day lingua franca, it is consistently perceived as having vital importance for global mobility, communications and the media (Seidlhofer, 2011). Scholars have repeatedly emphasized both its empowering role and the challenges it poses to other languages, described as a form of linguistic imperialism "transmorphing into linguistic neoimperialism" by Phillipson (2009, p. 134).

English has increasingly been tied to knowledge expansion and intellectual growth. Jenkins and Morán Panero (2025) highlight how universities worldwide increasingly provide English-medium instruction, reinforcing its dominance as the language of education. In the Macedonian context, Dimova (2025) documents the rising importance of English at universities, where it increasingly serves as a medium of instruction, not only in private institutions, where it has long been established, but also at state universities, where its role is steadily expanding.

Research also highlights the role of English as a global medium of communication and networking. In North Macedonia, as well as in many countries worldwide, English allows students to access global communities and international popular culture on the Internet. Ćurkova (2006) observes that Macedonian young people have integrated English deeply into their everyday

communication, reflecting broader global trends. Similarly, in a study of Slovene students, English was not perceived simply as a foreign language, but as a second language that is an essential requirement for life (Kavalir & Poteko, 2022).

Another recurring theme in the literature is the role of English in mobility and educational or professional opportunities. English is frequently described as opening “international doors” (Phillipson, 2009, p. 206). Similarly, Hjarvard (2004) argues that English is “the ‘protocol’ for oral and written communication across national frontiers” (p.76). For students, this links English proficiency to employment opportunities abroad.

English is also strongly associated with information access. Because most online resources, scientific databases, and media content are published in English, people worldwide view it as vital for keeping up with contemporary advancements. Dimova (2025) argues that in North Macedonia, content in English is extensively consumed on the Internet, providing access to scientific resources, entertainment, and digital platforms that connect Macedonian users to global content. This positions English as a universally recognized tool for staying connected to global developments.

Perhaps the most widely debated theme in the literature is the impact of English on linguistic identity. Scholars have long discussed whether English enriches the vocabularies of other languages or contributes to their attrition. It seems that attitudes to English are shaped by context. Hjarvard (2004) explains that younger, urban, and well-educated groups tend to view English more positively, while older, less-educated, and rural populations are more likely to regard English as intrusive in their local language and culture. This suggests that the same language may be embraced in one setting and resisted in another.

Thus, the literature positions English as both an empowering resource and a perceived threat. It enhances knowledge, communication, and opportunity while simultaneously raising questions about identity and language preservation. By focusing on regional variation in the perceptions of English in North Macedonia, the present study contributes to understanding how these tensions are experienced and expressed by students themselves.

3. Methodology

The sample included 210 respondents, of whom 113 were from Skopje, 84 from other urban centres, and 13 from rural communities. All participants were Macedonian university students from various academic disciplines. Their mean age was 21.99 years. The gender distribution of students was 156 female, 48 male, one non-binary, and five students preferring not to reveal their gender. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, and it was carried out in accordance with GDPR regulations on personal data protection. Informed consent was secured from all participants.

The data for this study constitutes part of a larger dataset collected in 2024 through an online questionnaire designed to elicit students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of English in their everyday lives. The survey was

conducted within the framework of the international SPEAKEng project of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. From this larger dataset, this paper analyses only the responses of students who provided answers to the questions concerning both their perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of English in their lives and their place of origin. Of the 210 students who answered these questions, 12 were excluded as invalid because their responses did not address the questions and instead consisted only of punctuation marks or irrelevant statements. For the purposes of this paper, those responses that were originally written in Macedonian were translated into English by the author.

The qualitative data were subjected to thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis. Responses were read and coded inductively into detailed subthemes. These were subsequently collated into five broader themes: (1) Knowledge and cognitive development, (2) Communication and social connectivity, (3) Mobility and practical advantages, (4) Access to information and opportunities, and (5) Identity and language preservation. The evaluative coding of themes as positive or negative followed the guidelines of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The results were then visualized in pie and bar charts to highlight the thematic distribution.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Skopje

In Skopje, the dominance of Identity and language preservation (34%) and its predominantly negative overtone (85.92%) show that students in the capital are strongly concerned about English overshadowing Macedonian, especially among younger generations. Research by Kramer et al. (2014) documents that in the capital - unlike the smaller towns of Tetovo, Kichevo and Gostivar - English is quite visible in the linguistic landscape, including signage, and advertising, where its use is perceived as a symbol of "globalization, cosmopolitanism, and modernity" and as "a type of visual lingua-franca" (p.17). According to Ćurkova (2006), Anglicisms have become increasingly widespread in Macedonian, with young people from Skopje being the most prominent users. The results show how English, with its growing visibility in public spaces and everyday usage among youth, intensifies concerns over the preservation of Macedonian. At the same time, the positivity in Knowledge and cognitive development (96.77%) and Access to information (100%) suggest that students from the capital perceive English as crucial for their academic and professional growth.

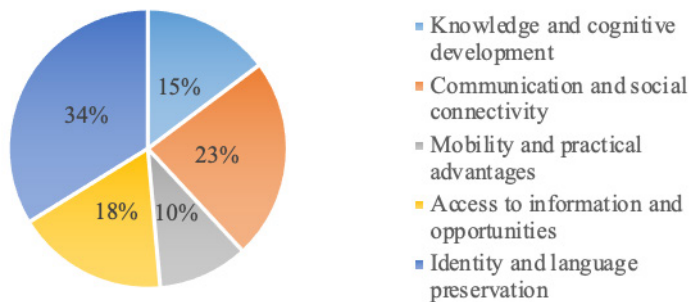


Figure 1. Thematic distribution in Skopje

4.2 Other urban centres

Among students from other Macedonian towns, the distribution was more balanced across themes (16%–23%), with Communication and social connectivity and Identity and language preservation being equally represented (23% each). This balance suggests a perception of English both as a medium of interaction and social exchange, and as a threat to Macedonian. At the same time, the relatively high positivity in Knowledge and cognitive development (83.87%) and Access to information (100%) suggests that in these towns, English is valued for academic advancement.

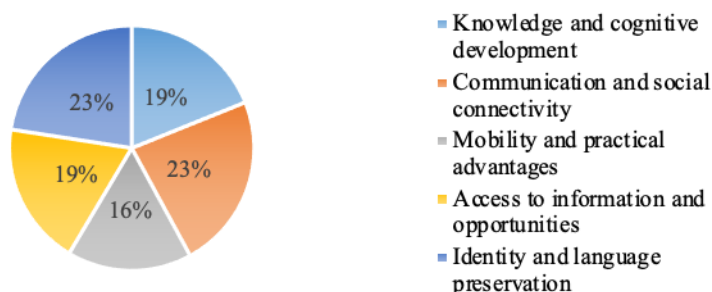


Figure 2. Thematic distribution in other urban areas

4.3 Rural areas

In rural areas, Communication and social connectivity was the most prevalent theme (30%), followed closely by Identity and language preservation (27%). This suggests that English is primarily perceived as a social and communicative resource for connecting with people beyond local boundaries. The positive connotation of comments about Mobility and practical advantages (20%) reflects aspirations for travel, migration, or employment abroad, which is consistent with Dimova's (2025) finding that English is tightly linked to student mobility. However, the strongly negative associations with the theme of language preservation (100% negative) highlight rural students' sensitivity to the perceived decline of Macedonian in everyday use.

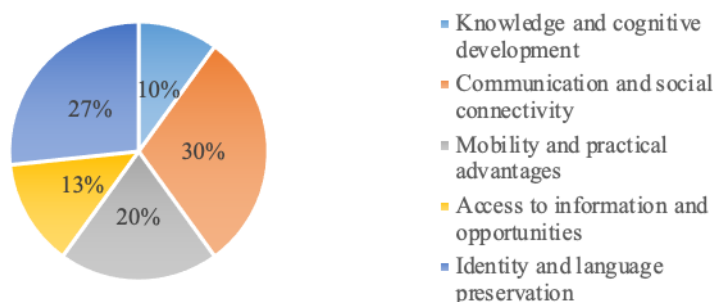


Figure 3. Thematic distribution in rural areas

4.4 Thematic coding analysis

The distribution of themes reveals distinct regional patterns (Figure 4). In Skopje, the theme of Identity and language preservation dominated, accounting for about 34% of responses, followed by Communication and social connectivity at 23%. In the rural areas, Communication and social connectivity featured most prominently at 30%, followed by concerns about Identity and language preservation at 27%. These exact two themes received the highest representation of 23% each among students from other towns. Urban respondents outside the capital demonstrated a more balanced distribution of the five major themes than the other regions, which displayed greater discrepancies. For example, in the rural areas, the theme of Communication and social connectivity was prevalent at 30%, while Knowledge and cognitive development featured considerably less prominently (10%). On the other hand, in Skopje, the theme of Mobility and practical advantages occurred least frequently in the students’ responses (10%), which is considerably lower than the predominant theme of Identity and language preservation (34%).

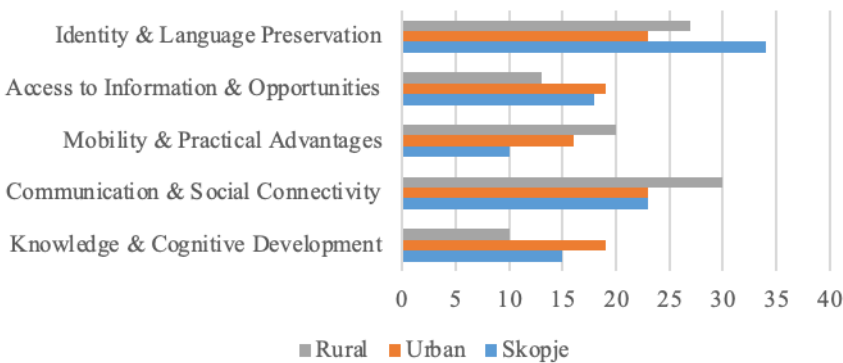


Figure 4. Thematic distribution per regions in percentages

4.4.1 Knowledge and cognitive development

The findings confirm that students across all regions recognize English as a powerful resource for cognitive growth and educational advancement. Respondents from urban areas emphasized this theme most (19%), reflecting the role of English in higher education and professional development in towns other than the capital. Within this category, students emphasised learning new words and vocabulary expansion, improved comprehension and expression, as well as the challenge of maintaining English proficiency, as is shown in the students’ comments:

“Positive - I have expanded my knowledge because I can also study in English.” (SK20)

“However, one negative aspect is the pressure to constantly improve and maintain my English skills.” (U4)

These perceptions resonate with Ćurkova's (2008) view that English is increasingly becoming the language of (higher) education, and Dimova's (2025) findings that English-medium instruction is ever more present in higher education in North Macedonia, which reinforces the connection between English and academic advancement. However, as some of the responses demonstrate, while success in English opens doors for some, it also closes doors for others who are not as proficient (Phillipson, 2009).

4.4.2 Communication and social connectivity

Communication was one of the most prominent themes, accounting for 23% of responses in Skopje, 23% in other urban areas, and 30% in rural areas. Students viewed English primarily as a medium for creating and sustaining social bonds, particularly online, which mirrors Crystal's (2003, p.xiii) account of English as the global lingua franca, offering "unprecedented possibilities for mutual understanding". Rural students emphasized this theme most strongly, underscoring the role of English in overcoming geographic isolation and accessing communities beyond their local environment. However, occasional comments about some peers not being able to follow English confirm Jenkins and Morán Panero's (2025) argument that English can deprive some people of opportunities simply by virtue of the fact that their knowledge of English was not native-like. The overall positivity of this theme suggests that students perceive English as a vital resource for social connectivity, which occasionally carries risks of exclusion, as is demonstrated in the following responses:

"Positive aspects I would consider the ability to interact and create connections with different people from anywhere." (R13)

"Negative - not all of my friends understand the language." (U65)

4.4.3 Mobility & Practical Advantages

Mobility and practical advantages were uniformly coded as positive (100%), with rural students emphasizing this theme most (20%). Students associated English with travel, career opportunities, and the chance to study or work abroad, as is shown in the comments below:

"Positive – it ... makes traveling easier, and we have greater chances of making progress at work." (R11)

"Positive: job opportunities, very useful for traveling because everyone understands it." (U38)

These results strongly support Graddol's (2006, pp. 107, 116) notion of global English evolving from a foreign language to an essential skill that is indispensable, rather than providing a competitive advantage for advancement on the job market. They are also consistent with Dimova's (2025) argument that English is central to academic and professional mobility in North Macedonia. The fact that rural students stressed mobility more than their urban counterparts

likely reflects both aspiration and necessity in the sense that local opportunities are perceived as limited, and English is seen as a gateway to opportunities beyond their local community.

4.4.4 Access to Information & Opportunities

English was consistently associated with access to cultural, academic, and digital resources, with percentages ranging from 13% in rural areas to 19% in other urban centres. Students highlighted access to books, films, music, internet resources, and academic materials, confirming Ćurkova's (2008) observation that English dominates global media and online content. Importantly, all responses under this theme were positive, emphasizing the appreciation of the opportunities English provides, which Macedonian cannot always offer, as the following responses demonstrate:

“There are many different books, films, series and all kinds of other content available in English, but not in Macedonian.” (U50)

“The positive thing is that knowing English opens many doors for me in different parts of my life, such as ... exposure to diverse contents on the internet, because with Macedonian they are very limited.” (U9)

4.4.5 Identity & Language Preservation

Identity and language preservation was the most sensitive theme, accounting for 34% of responses in Skopje, 23% in other towns, and 27% in rural areas. Unlike other themes, this one was overwhelmingly negative (over 85% across regions). Students expressed strong concerns that English threatens Macedonian by encouraging code-switching, replacing native words through borrowing of English lexemes, and diminishing the prestige of Macedonian among youth. This is in contrast to Dimova's (2007) observation that, during that period, Macedonians did not seem to view the extensive borrowing from English in a negative light. The students' perceptions align with Minova-Ćurkova's (2019) findings that English borrowings increasingly enter the Macedonian lexicon at the expense of the Macedonian vocabulary and the Cyrillic script, particularly in Skopje, where English is highly visible in advertising and the media (Ćurkova, 2006). The sharp negativity recorded here echoes Phillipson's (2009) theory of linguistic imperialism, which highlights the risks of smaller languages being marginalized by global English. Students from Skopje, in particular, reported experiencing or observing signs of language attrition, though some also acknowledged potential advantages in being able to express themselves more fluently in English, as illustrated below:

“I have noticed that many Macedonian youngsters prefer speaking English, or don't know how to express themselves in Macedonian at all, and that's something that I find very negative.” (SK89)

“Some of the many positive things I can think of are that sometimes it is easier for me to express myself in English... On the other hand, the negative things are that quite often I don’t remember Macedonian words so I have to use English and there is a conflict because I don’t use my native language.” (SK84)

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides some useful perspectives, it still has its limitations. The dataset was restricted to three broad regional categories (Skopje, other urban centres, and rural areas), which cannot capture the full diversity of the Macedonian sociolinguistic landscape. In addition, the number of students from rural areas was considerably smaller than in the other regions, making this group less representative. A more balanced sample would have allowed for better comparability across regions. Future research could also focus on comparative studies across age groups or between different Balkan countries, as they could also provide valuable insights into whether these attitudes to English are uniquely Macedonian or part of a broader regional pattern.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Macedonian students perceive English both as a valuable resource and as a challenge. Across all groups, English was strongly associated with communication, access to information, mobility, and cognitive development, and these themes were overwhelmingly discussed in positive terms. At the same time, identity and language preservation appeared to be the most sensitive category, predominantly negative across regions, and reflected profound concerns about English overshadowing Macedonian through borrowings, code-switching, and reduced prestige of the official language. These findings highlight the ambivalent role of English in the students’ lives. On the one hand, it expands their educational, social, and professional horizons, but it simultaneously raises their anxiety and fears about L1 attrition.

Across the three studied regions, variation in the prevalence of themes was evident, and it was closely dependent on the local context. Skopje students expressed the strongest identity-related concerns, mirroring the capital’s massive exposure to English in all spheres of life. Respondents from other towns exhibited a more balanced pattern, while rural students, more than those in Skopje or other towns, recognized English as a tool for connectivity and mobility beyond their immediate communities, despite concerns about its infiltration into their daily lives. Overall, these findings suggest that attitudes to English are shaped not only by global trends, but also by the students’ local environments with varying access to opportunities and exposure to English. Educational policies should, therefore, aim to maximise the benefits of English for the students, while simultaneously ensuring the preservation of the Macedonian language and cultural identity.

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