Profiling Clients in the Language School Market

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the clients of language schools and, based on this analysis, redefines the basic characteristics of the language school market, which should lead to an increase in the competitiveness of language schools. The results of this study are based on a quantitative analysis of customer preferences, expectations, and experiences. Characterization of language school clients itself focuses on the roles of the clients and their preferences regarding the place of study, type of study, study content, and form of study. This empirical study is based on quantitative research in the form of a questionnaire survey which took place during 2021. The data comes from a total of 421 completed questionnaires. Data collection and reaching out to suitable respondents were ensured through partner organizations that participated in this research project. Based on contradictions between theory and empirical findings, a total of five statistical hypotheses were established. These were supplemented by testing dependencies of selected variables in relation to the respondent's country of origin. Based on the chi-square test of independence, Fisher's exact test, and proportional test, it was found that the majority of language school clients (1) are not children and students, (2) are not motivated to learn by staying abroad, (3) do not prefer traditional course-based teaching, (4) prefer face-to-face teaching, and (5) do not prefer learning/teaching with specialized content. These findings have led to a better understanding of the language school market and revealed hidden opportunities for language schools to develop their competitiveness, which derives from a customer perspective.

1 INTRODUCTION

The sector of language schools and, more generally, the non-formal education sector, has significant growth potential. There are four growth areas, including the leisure sector, public administration, healthcare, and education (Drucker, 2020; Line, 2002). However, one of the sectors in non-formal education is experiencing the opposite trend. The language education industry is declining. There are several factors that may be causing this negative development. From informal interviews with representatives of language schools and a survey of literary sources, it has been found that language schools, like other sectors of the economy, are influenced by digitalization. In the case of education, this primarily refers to online applications, which can become a significant alternative to traditional education. Digitalization is also related to the trend of online teaching, which was accelerated by the crisis in the education sector caused by the COVID pandemic (Selwyn, 2020; Bates, 2019). Language schools are also facing a long-term decline in demand for their products (this fact was determined from informal interviews with language school owners and managers, as well as an analysis of non-scientific publications) and highly competitive competition, leading to pressure on the reduction of prices and the subsequent decrease in profit margins (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Slinták et al., 2022). According to the CRIBIS database, there are approximately 600 language schools in the Czech Republic, and according to data from the Association of Language Schools, there are 360

language schools in Slovakia. Based on market research, I assume that there are 500 language schools in Croatia, approximately 2,200 schools in Poland and 300 language schools in Latvia. Language schools are thus facing significant technological shifts (the trend of digitization and online teaching) as well as significant market changes (a decline in interest in language school products and a deteriorating economic model of language schools). Last but not least, there are findings that provide a critical analysis of the current language school market. As Jordan and Long (2022) state, increasing commercialization has led to poor teaching, boring materials, inadequate training in foreign language teaching, and inappropriate testing practices.

These facts led me to the idea of conducting international research focused on analyzing the needs and expectations of language school customers. The aim was to profile the clients of language schools and gain a better understanding and description of the market changes occurring in this educational sector. The motivation for this study came not only from the owners and managers of language schools but also from findings obtained through a literature review. It was found that the field of language education in the context of business model creation is not a frequently researched area of interest within the scientific community (Malara & Ziembicki, 2020). In other words, there are not many studies in scientific databases that address changes in the preferences of language school customers or examined these based on selected characteristics and interdependencies. Therefore, I decided to conduct a quantitative research study in five E.U. countries with the aim of characterizing language school clients and identifying changes in their perception of the value provided by language education providers, which could affect the competitiveness of language schools in Central Europe.

In the following sections, Iwill first describe the basic theoretical framework that emerged from the analysis of sources published in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. In the subsequent section, I will present the research questions and hypotheses that were tested based on the quantitative research. The methodology section will describe the nature and structure of the research, as well as the basic statistical and mathematical methods used for data analysis. In the penultimate section, I will present the results of the survey and evaluate the established hypotheses. In the concluding part of this study, I will summarize the findings, discuss the limitations, and outline the future direction of our research.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

Due to the focus of the article and its research plan, which is part of a broader concept, I decided to conduct a literature review based on the following scheme:.
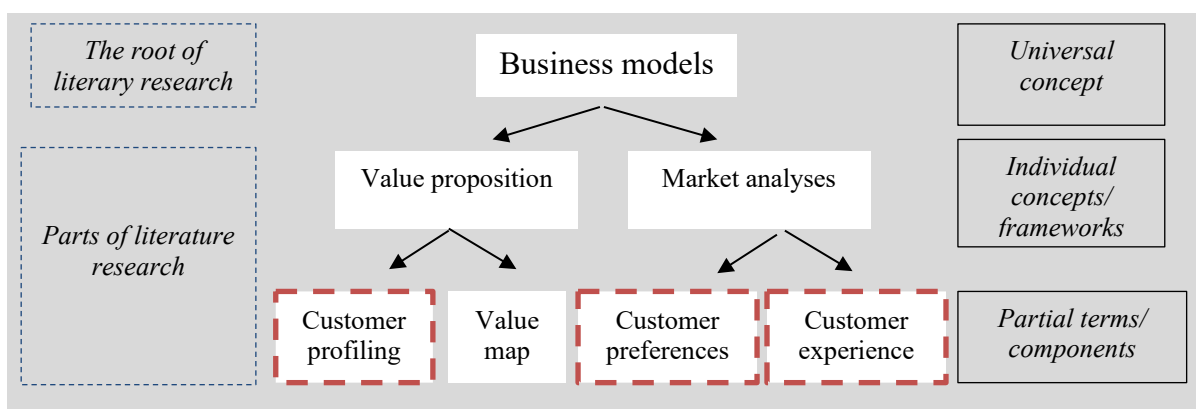

Fig. 1 - Literary research concept. Source: own processing.

First, I define business models as an overarching concept. With reference to key thinkers (Blank and Euchner, 2018; Osterwalder et. al., 2015; Maurya, 2022; Ries, 2011), the core of business models is the customer and the resulting market perspective based on customer

expectations, preferences and experiences. The theoretical background on business models is therefore absolutely necessary for a deeper understanding of the central concept of this article, which is customer profiling. The research will also include individual concepts related to the area of business models, such as the creation of a value proposition (VPC concept) and market analysis. The literature search will be carried out in the logic of the transition from a universal concept to individual concepts and special terms that relate to the research outputs of this article.

Business models

Researching customer preferences and their profiling is closely linked to the area of business models. From the point of view of current theory, the term "business models" can be characterized as a conceptual framework that describes the logic and structure of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value in a specific market or industry (Osterwalder et al., 2011, Maurya, 2022). Business models provide a holistic understanding of how a business operates and generates revenue by addressing key elements such as customer segments, value proposition, revenue streams, cost structure, and key activities (Teece, 2010).

The following are some key characteristics of business models from the perspective of current theory: (1) Value creation and value capture: Business models focus on creating value for customers and capturing value for the organization. Osterwalder and Pigneur (2014) propose the business model canvas, which identifies key components of a business model, including the value proposition and customers segments. (2) Holistic view: Business models take a holistic approach by considering various components and interactions within the organization and its environment. Teece (2010) emphasizes the importance of aligning resources, capabilities, and activities to create a unique value proposition. (3) Competitiveness, adaptability and innovation: Business models need to be adaptable and capable of evolving over time. Amit and Zott (2012) discuss the concept of business model innovation, which involves reconfiguring existing elements or introducing new approaches to deliver and capture value. The area of business model innovation is also related to competitiveness, which is increasingly the subject of research by many scientists (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010; Chesbrough, 2010; Masa et al., 2017), who deal with changing business models and the impact of these changes on current market structures. (4) Ecosystem perspective: Contemporary business models recognize the importance of partnerships and collaborations within ecosystems. Afuah and Tucci (2012) discuss crowdsourcing as a means to tap into external resources and knowledge. (5) Digital transformation: Digitalization is a significant aspect of modern business models. Johnson et. al. (2008) highlight the need for businesses to reinvent their models in the face of technological advancements and changing customer behaviors. (6) Sustainable and social impact: Business models increasingly incorporate sustainability and social impact considerations. Casadesus-Masanell and Ricart (2011) emphasize the integration of sustainability practices into business models to address environmental and societal challenges.

For completeness, in the following table I present a list of authors who deal with business models in the context of the basic characteristics of this concept.

Tab. 1 - Literary sources about business models. Source: own research

Characteristics of business models	Authors
Definitions of business models	Amit & Zott, 2001, Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart (2011), Chesbrough (2007), Zott & Amit, 2007, Maurya (2022), Ostewalder et al. (2015), Wirtz et al. (2016)
Value creation and value capture	Amit & Zott (2001), Baden-Fuller & Morgan (2010), Chesbrough (2010), Maurya (2022), Magretta (2002),

	Ostewalder et al. (2011, 2014, 2015), Frankenberger et. al. (2013), Zott et al. (2011)
Visualization/concept	Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart (2011), Ostewalder et al. (2014), Maurya (2022); Johnson et al. (2008), Shafer et al. (2005)
Business model innovation	Massa et al. (2017), Frankenberger et. al. (2013), Chesbrough (2010), Zott & Amit (2010)
Business model patterns	Foss & Saebi (2017), Chesbrough & Rosenbloom (2002), Osterwalder (2015), Teece (2010), Johnson, Christensen & Kagermann (2008)
Sustainability and competitiveness	Boons & Lüdeke-Freund (2013), Schaltegger & Wagner (2011), Stubbs & Cocklin (2008)

Value proposition and market analysis

The essence of business models is based on the creation of a value proposition in relation to understanding the market and its customers. This is related to a number of theoretical concepts that facilitate the creation of a value proposition. The VPC model links the value map with customer profiling and leads to value hypothesis testing (Osterwaler et al., 2015). Several authors have contributed to the understanding of these concepts and their interplay in the business world. Smith and Johnson (2018) propose a framework that integrates market analysis and value proposition development. They emphasize the significance of conducting thorough market analysis to identify customer needs, market trends, and competitive dynamics. By leveraging market analysis insights, businesses can create a compelling value proposition that aligns with customer desires and differentiates the offering from competitors. Thompson and Miller (2019) discuss the role of market analysis in shaping value propositions. They emphasize the iterative nature of market analysis and value proposition development, where continuous gathering of market insights informs the refinement and alignment of the value proposition with evolving customer preferences. Ries (2011) explores the lean startup methodology, which involves validating value propositions through iterative customer feedback and experimentation. Although not directly focused on market analysis and value proposition, Ries (2011) highlights the importance of continuously refining the value proposition to achieve product-market fit.

In the context of this paper, this section can be expanded to include studies that examine value proposition from the perspective of educational sustainability (Tien et al., 2021) or entrepreneurship development in tertiary education (Bodolica & Spraggon, 2021). Studies that deal with value analysis in relation to language schools were not found.

Preferences of language school clients

Slinták et al. (2022) found through a survey that most language schools consider children (i.e., primary school pupils) and youth (i.e., secondary school students) as key customers (i.e., 56 % of all customers). Another important customer group is adults. In contrast, a study by other authors suggests that adult learners are a significant client group for language schools (Wang & Parkvithee, 2018; Rice & Stavrianos, 1995). Additionally, international students seeking language proficiency for academic purposes, such as preparation for university studies or standardized language exams, are another significant client group for language schools (Paltridge and Starfield, 2013). These students often attend language schools to improve their language skills before or during their studies in a foreign country. Furthermore, individuals with specific language needs, such as immigrants or expatriates living in a new country, often seek language instruction at language schools to facilitate their integration into the local community and improve their communication skills (Zhou, 2016).

Several studies have explored the preferences of language school clients regarding their preferred learning environment or location. These studies aim to understand client preferences and inform language schools in providing suitable options for their clients. Istifci (2017) revealed that students liked the flexibility of online learning, but preferred face-to-face communication with a teacher and classmates. In terms of their ideas about the online platforms of course books, their ideas varied. Lai and Zhao (2006) investigated language learners' preferences for synchronous online communication tools and highlighted the convenience and flexibility that learners enjoyed in engaging in language learning anytime and anywhere. Muthuprasad et al. (2021) explored students' preferences for various attributes of online classes that will be useful in designing an effective online learning environment. The results showed that the majority of respondents (70%) are ready to choose online courses to master the curriculum. Katrenko and Potapenko (2024) emphasize that with the rapid advancement of technology, language learning has transitioned into the digital realm, offering learners unprecedented access to resources and tools for enhancing their skills. Law et al. (2019) focused on the impact of e-learning on intercultural competence and revealed that learners appreciated the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures through online platforms. Alkhezzi and Al-Dousari (2016) explored language learners' attitudes towards mobile technologies for language learning and found that mobile phones can be used in many different ways to learn technical and semi-technical vocabulary easily outside the classroom. These studies highlight the diverse preferences of language school clients regarding the learning environment, including preferences for traditional classrooms, online platforms, synchronous communication tools, and mobile technologies. Considering these preferences, language schools should offer a range of learning options to meet the needs and preferences of their clients.

Some studies explore gender differences in language learning. These studies have primarily focused on broader topics such as language proficiency, learning strategies, or language attitudes. For example, Sumarni and Rachmawaty (2019) investigated gender differences in language learning strategies among university students. Ayaz (2017) found out that female students tended to use more metacognitive and social strategies, while male students favored memory-related strategies. The preference for classical courses among language school clients can vary depending on factors such as individual learning styles, language learning goals, and the availability of alternative learning options. While some clients may prefer traditional classroom-based language courses, others may opt for alternative formats or blended learning approaches that combine in-person and online components. Gangahagedara et al. (2021) explored the preferences of language learners and found that while some learners favored traditional classroom-based instruction, others expressed a preference for online language courses due to their flexibility and convenience. On the other hand, Cubillos (2007) found no significant differences in the performance of students in any of the ability measures under consideration, but that the hybrid format was largely favored by college learners due to its autonomy and flexibility. Furthermore, Ruhe and Zumbo (2008) highlighted that factors such as scheduling flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and personalized learning experiences were influential in shaping learner preferences for classical courses or alternative options. While classical courses in language schools have traditionally been popular, the evolving landscape of language learning has led to the emergence of alternative options that cater to the diverse preferences of language learners. Online platforms and language learning apps, such as Duolingo and Rosetta Stone, offer self-paced and interactive learning experiences (Arvanitis, 2019). Blended learning approaches that combine face-to-face instruction with online components have also gained traction in language education (Snart, 2010). Individual preferences can vary based on factors such as age, learning goals, and personal learning styles. While there is anecdotal evidence and case studies discussing the preferences of language

school clients, there is a lack of comprehensive empirical research specifically addressing whether most language school clients prefer classical courses. Further research, including surveys, interviews, and market studies targeting language learners, would provide more specific insights into their preferences for different course formats.

In general, however, good language teaching requires an understanding of the approach to learning (the foreign language learner's perspective). As Jordan and Long (2022) state, this fact is ignored not only by teachers, but also by language schools, which limit teaching to the level of courses, conversations and private lessons. Studies by Bowen et al. (2014) and Dziubanet et al. (2018) have explored language learners' preferences in different contexts. These studies indicate a general inclination towards face-to-face teaching. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a shift in language teaching, necessitating the use of online and remote learning options. There are several studies related to language learning preferences among clients of language schools. Some authors conducted a study investigating ESL learners''preferences for classroom activities, specifically comparing face-to-face and online learning environments. Assaly and Atamna (2023) indicated that a majority of learners preferred face-to-face interactions in their language learning experience. Thanasoulas (2000) explored the concept of learner autonomy in college English language learning. This study examined the preferences and attitudes of learners towards autonomous language learning methods. The results revealed that many learners expressed a preference for taking control of their own learning process. In the context of intercultural communication, Steele (2000) investigated the perceptions of language learners regarding the role of culture in language learning. The study revealed that learners recognized the importance of intercultural communication skills alongside language proficiency. Abdu and Nagaratnam (2011) conducted a study focusing on the grammar-teaching preferences of ESL teachers. The study aimed to identify teachers' preferences in terms of grammar instruction methods. The findings showed variations in teachers' preferences, indicating a diversity of instructional approaches. Little et al. (2002) studied the autonomy of the learner in foreign language teaching and focused their study on the deepening and development of pupils' autonomy in the foreign language class. The study examined how learners' autonomy evolved throughout their language learning journey, highlighting the importance of fostering learner autonomy for successful language learning outcomes. Some authors note that students have persistent difficulties in both productive and receptive skills (Compe, 2024). In addition, Bada and Okan (2000) found that types of learning that focus only on receptive skills do not appeal to students. There is a significant tendency among students for classroom content that observes both receptive and productive skills to be equally emphasized. These studies collectively contribute to our understanding of language learners' preferences and provide valuable insights for language schools in designing effective instructional approaches and meeting the diverse needs of their clients.

Customer profiling and customer experiences

Customer profiling plays a crucial role in gaining deep insights into customer behavior, preferences, and needs. Vargo and Lusch (2008) propose a service-dominant logic that emphasizes the shift towards customer-centric strategies. They argue that businesses should focus on understanding the co-creation of value with customers and building relationships based on mutual value co-creation. Payne and Frow (2005) provide a comprehensive framework for effective customer relationship management, emphasizing the importance of customer segmentation, targeting, and positioning. They highlight the need to understand customer needs and preferences to develop tailored value propositions.

Customer experience has emerged as a critical factor in driving customer satisfaction, loyalty, and business success. Meyer and Schwager (2007) argue that customer experience encompasses every interaction and touchpoint between the customer and the company, encompassing both functional and emotional aspects. They emphasize the need for businesses to actively manage and enhance the customer experience to differentiate themselves in the market. Verhoef et al. (2009) explore the determinants, dynamics, and management strategies related to customer experience creation. They highlight the importance of personalization, customization, and customer-centricity in designing and delivering exceptional experiences.

In the context of language schools, understanding the motivations and satisfaction of clients is of paramount importance. Bowden et al. (2021) model and measure two antecedents to engagement, namely involvement and expectations, four dimensions of engagement, namely affective, social, cognitive and behavioral engagement, and their relative and differential impact upon five specific student and institutional success outcomes namely, institutional reputation, student wellbeing, transformative learning, self-efficacy and self-esteem. Yan and Berliner (2013) focus on the satisfaction of Chinese international students with university life, specifically in a language school setting. They highlight the significance of academic support, campus facilities, and social integration in influencing student satisfaction. Eder et al. (2010) explore the factors influencing student study abroad destination choice.

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The main objective is to profile customers of LS in selected countries of Central Europe. The underlying universal concept of this empirical research is based on the assumptions of business model theory and the lean startup methodology. The initial assumptions of this study (formulation of statistical hypotheses) are derived from findings of exploratory research, market analysis of language schools, analysis of non-scientific articles, and a three-level literature review.

The quantitative research of language school clients focused on their profiling. This study is carried out on two levels, namely in the level of dependence of the selected variable on the country of origin and to characterize language school customers and their prevailing preferences. The main output of this research was testing five statistical hypotheses in relation to the profiling of language school clients. The research concept, including the key variables under investigation, is presented in the following figure:
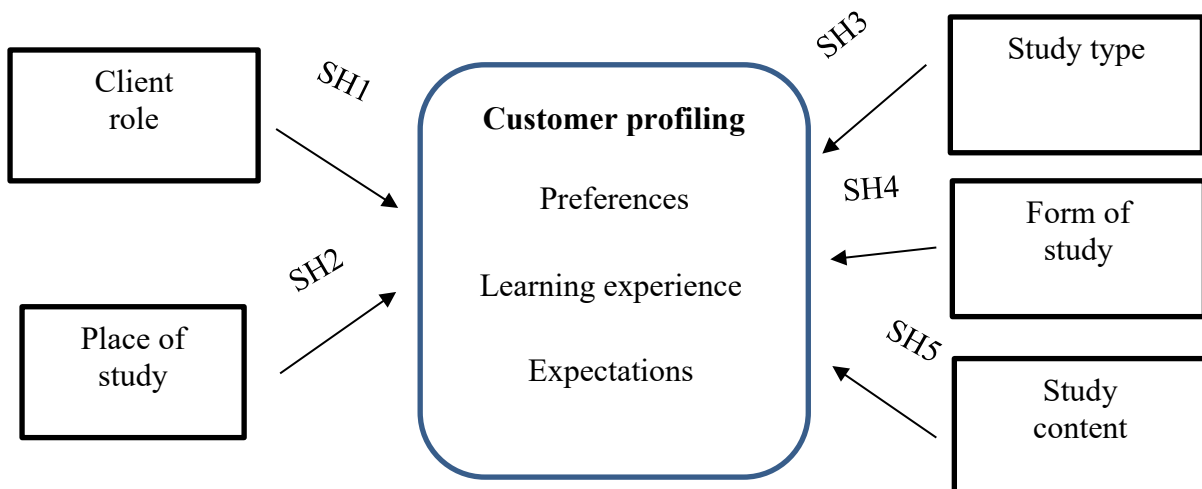

Fig.2 - Research concept. Source: own processing

The logic of the conducted research consists of three phases: (1) defining research activities based on a set of research questions, (2) identifying discrepancies between theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, and (3) testing the formulated hypotheses. The resulting form of the tested hypotheses is listed in the following table.

Tab. 2 - Formation of statistical hypotheses. Source: own processing

Stage I: Delineation of research areas	Stage II: Identification of discrepancies		Stage III: Formulation and verification of hypotheses
Research questions (RQs)	Theoretical backgrounds	Research/market analysis	Statistical hypotheses (SHs)
RQ1: Who is a client of language schools?	Adult learners are a significant client group for language schools (Wang & Parkvithee, 2018; Rice & Stavrianos, 1995)	The majority of language schools consider children and youth as a key customer (Slinták et al., 2022)	SH1: Most customers of language schools are students of primary and secondary schools (more than 50 % of total)
RQ2: Where do clients want to learn?	Learners enjoyed in engaging in language learning anytime and anywhere due to digitization (Lai & Zhao, 2006; Katrenko & Potapenko, 2024; Muthuprasad et al., 2021)	Students prefer to do writing activities online but engage in the discussion in person. (Kemp & Grieve, 2014)	SH2: The majority of customers are stimulated to learn by an educational stay abroad (more than 50 % of total).
RQ3: What type of study do clients prefer?	Johnson (2015) and Bezerra (2024) found that students expressed a strong preference for face-to-face classroom activities.	Teaching is based on courses, conversations, and private lessons. (Jordan & Long, 2022).	SH3: Most customers tend to prefer classic courses (more than 50 % of total).
RQ4: What form of study do clients prefer (in-person/online)?	Some learners favored traditional classroom-based instruction, others expressed a preference for online language courses (Gangahagedara et al., 2021).	There were no significant differences in the performance of students in any of the ability measures under consideration, but the hybrid format was largely favored by these college learners due to its autonomy and flexibility (Cubillos, 2007).	SH4: The majority of customers prefer face-to-face teaching (more than 50 % of total).
RQ5: What course content do clients prefer?	Students have persistent difficulties in both productive and receptive skills (Compe, 2024). There is a significant tendency among students for course content to focus on the development of both receptive and productive skills. (Bada & Okan, 2000)	Language schools primarily offer courses without a professional context (Slinták et al., 2022).	SH5: The majority of customers prefer language teaching without a professional context (more than 50 % of total).

In order to achieve the research goals, a questionnaire survey method was employed, making this study quantitative in nature. The purpose of the questionnaire survey was to gather insights and information about the perspective and characteristics of customers at a language school. The respondents were individuals who were clients of the language school, resulting in the acquisition of unique primary data during 2021. What sets this dataset apart is that data collection occurred simultaneously in multiple partner countries, namely Latvia, Slovakia, Croatia, Poland, and the Czech Republic.

The questionnaire yielded a sample size of n = 421. The data from the questionnaires (Q2) were summarized in a basic data file (via Google Forms). The answers were coded in a standard manner, where respondents could choose from a selection of predetermined answers (known as nominal data), and only closed-ended questions were included.

Descriptive statistics were utilized. The variables were assessed for normality using Wilk-Shapiro tests. However, given that the data primarily consisted of nominal data, no indications of normal distribution were observed. As a result, non-parametric statistical methods were employed to test the statistical hypotheses. The data were summarized and examined for outliers and missing values. To address the research questions, statistical tests such as the chi-square test of independence, Fisher's exact test, and proportional test were used. In cases where the assumptions for the chi-square test of independence were not met, the Fisher's exact test was used as an alternative (especially in cases where it was necessary to work with a small sample of data for a given category). All statistical calculations were performed using R statistical software version 4.2.1.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are divided into two areas of research: (1) Research focused on testing the dependence between a given variable (e.g., client role, place of study, etc.) and the respondent's country of origin. (2) Research testing a given assumption that arose from a discrepancy between theory and empirical results.

4.1 RQ1 - Who is a customer of LS?

According to the survey results, almost one-fifth (18.8%) of the customers are secondary school students. The second important customer segment, however, consists of operational employees. Following that, the third most important customer segment is comprised of pupils, accounting for 12.1% of the client base. On the other hand, the survey indicates that seniors and women on maternity leave are the least represented among the company's clients.

Dependency between client role and country of origin

In addition to the previous analysis, the study also included a hypothesis testing the relationship between the client's identification and the country in which the client studies (represented by the variable "country of origin"). The research question RQ1, which aimed to understand the characteristics of language school clients, was derived from the data, and the hypothesis SH1 was subsequently tested in the study. The results of this testing, specifically examining the relationship between the client's identification and their country of origin, are presented in the table below.

I will share the findings from testing five assumptions developed based on a literature review and market analysis. This phase of the research will focus on examining specific assumptions about the needs, values, preferences, and expectations of LS customers.

Tab. 3 - The role of the client in relation to countries of origin. Source: own research (2021)

	Croatia	Czechia	Latvia	Poland	Slovakia	Total
Artist	7 (5.93;0.44)	0 (0.13; -0.36)	4 (2.19;1.22)	0 (1.78; -1.33)	0 (0.97; -0.98)	11
Entrepreneur	2 (7.01; -1.89)	0 (0.15; -0.39)	8 (2.59;3.36)	0 (2.1; -1.45)	3 (1.14;1.74)	13
Manager/ Director	19 (25.88; -1.35)	0 (0.57; -0.76)	19 (9.58;3.04)	3 (7.75; -1.71)	7 (4.22;1.35)	48
Official	23 (23.72; -0.15)	0 (0.52; -0.72)	11 (8.78;0.75)	1 (7.11; -2.29)	9 (3.87;2.61)	44
Operational employee	52 (38.28;2.22)	2 (0.84;1.26)	7 (14.17; -1.9)	5 (11.47; -1.91)	5 (6.24; -0.5)	71
Ph.D. student	3 (1.62;1.09)	0 (0.04; -0.19)	0 (0.6; -0.77)	0 (0.48; -0.7)	0 (0.26; -0.51)	3
Pupil	7 (27.5; -3.91)	0 (0.61; -0.78)	3 (10.18; -2.25)	35 (8.24;9.32)	6 (4.48;0.72)	51
Secondary school student	55 (42.6;1.9)	1 (0.94;0.06)	3 (15.76; -3.21)	20 (12.76;2.03)	0 (6.94; -2.63)	79
Senior	6 (5.39;0.26)	0 (0.12; -0.34)	4 (2;1.42)	0 (1.62; -1.27)	0 (0.88; -0.94)	10
Teacher/ Academic	34 (29.66;0.8)	1 (0.65;0.43)	16 (10.97;1.52)	2 (8.88; -2.31)	2 (4.83; -1.29)	55
University student	17 (16.18;0.2)	1 (0.36;1.08)	7 (5.99;0.41)	1 (4.85; -1.75)	4 (2.64;0.84)	30
Woman on maternity leave	2 (3.24; -0.69)	0 (0.07; -0.27)	2 (1.2;0.73)	1 (0.97;0.03)	1 (0.53;0.65)	6
Total	227	5	84	68	37	421

The test results indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship between the variables "client role" and "the respondent's country of origin?" The test statistic, $\chi^2(44, N = 421)$, is 225.71, with a p-value of less than 0.01. This provides sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Based on these findings, we can assume that there is a significant and meaningful association between the two variables. Additionally, the Cramer coefficient value, V (df = 44), is 0.37, indicating a medium level of dependency between the variables.

Testing hypothesis SH1

This hypothesis was focused on identifying the typical customers of LS. Based on a market analysis of the language school sector, it was hypothesized that most clients would consist of children and young individuals.

Tab. 4 -Results of hypothesis SH1 testing. Source: own research (2021)

Statistical hypothesis	X-squared	df	p-value
SH1: Most customers of LS are students of primary and secondary schools (exceeding 50 % of respondents)	20.988	1	1

Based on the test results, specifically with a p-value greater than 0.05, I do not have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, I suppose that more than 50% of LS customers are not students, and I cannot disprove the initial theoretical assumption that adult learners form

a significant client group for language schools (Wang & Parkvithee, 2018; Rice & Stavrianos, 1995). I will continue to investigate the claim of a predominant cohort of language school students in light of future studies.

4.2 RQ2 - Where do customers want to learn?

During my investigation of LS customers, I also aimed to determine which learning environment best facilitated their foreign language learning experience. The findings revealed that the non-formal school environment was the most stimulating for the majority of clients, accounting for 56.9% of the total respondents. The second significant environment was a stay abroad or foreign trip, which was considered important by 31.5% of the clients, followed by the online environment, which garnered a preference from 25.1% of the clients.

Dependency between place of study and country of origin

In addition to the analysis, I also tested a hypothesis that explored the relationship between the spatial definition of learning and the respondent's origin. Based on the collected data, I formulated the research question RQ2 ("Where do customers want to learn?") and subsequently tested the hypothesis SH2. The results are presented in the following table.

Tab. 5 -The place of study in the context of countries of origin. Source: own research (2021)

	Croatia	Czechia	Latvia	Poland	Slovakia	Total
Formal environment (school)	49 (50.67; -0.23)	1 (1.01; -0.01)	22 (21.86;0.03)	21 (17.82;0.75)	8 (9.64; -0.53)	101
At home	52 (44.65;1.1)	1 (0.89;0.12)	15 (19.26; -0.97)	14 (15.71; -0.43)	7 (8.5; -0.51)	89
Nature	15 (17.06; -0.5)	0 (0.34; -0.58)	5 (7.36; -0.87)	7 (6;0.41)	7 (3.25;2.08)	34
Non-formal school environment	126 (115.88;0.94)	5 (2.31;1.77)	40 (49.99; -1.41)	49 (40.76;1.29)	11 (22.05; -2.35)	231
Online	50 (49.66;0.05)	0 (0.99; -0.99)	15 (21.43; -1.39)	25 (17.47;1.8)	9 (9.45; -0.15)	99
Private environment	44 (48.66; -0.67)	1 (0.97;0.03)	23 (20.99;0.44)	16 (17.12; -0.27)	13 (9.26;1.23)	97
Stay abroad / foreign trip	65 (76.75; -1.34)	1 (1.53; -0.43)	49 (33.11;2.76)	20 (27; -1.35)	18 (14.6;0.89)	153
Work environment	51 (48.66;0.34)	0 (0.97; -0.98)	26 (20.99;1.09)	7 (17.12; -2.45)	13 (9.26;1.23)	97
Total	452	9	195	159	86	901

Based on the test results, specifically with a test statistic of $\chi 2(28, N = 901)$ equal to 52.98 and a p-value less than 0.01, I have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, I will assume that there is a statistically significant dependence between the variables "place of study" and "the respondent's country of origin." The Cramer coefficient, with a value of V (df = 28) equal to 0.12, indicates a weak dependency between the variables. A detailed analysis of the residuals revealed notable differences among Slovakia, Latvia, and Poland. In Latvia, respondents selected "stay abroad/foreign trip" more often than expected. In Poland, the option "work environment" was chosen less frequently than anticipated. In Slovakia, respondents showed a higher-than-expected preference for "nature" and a lower-than-expected preference for "informal school environment." These findings highlight notable variations in preferences for learning environments across these countries.

Testing hypothesis SH2

In my research, I also explored the spatial preferences of language school customers. Drawing upon the insights from previous authors such as Paltridge and Starfield (2013), I hypothesized that the majority of clients would express a preference for learning a foreign language in a different country, specifically through a stay abroad program.

Tab.6 -Results of hypothesis SH2 testing. Source: own research (2021)

Statistical hypothesis	X-squared	df	p-value
SH2: Majority of customers are stimulated to learn by an educational stay abroad (exceeding 50 % of respondents)	392.49	1	1

Based on the test results, specifically with a p-value greater than 0.05, I do not have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, I suppose that more than 50% of clients are not particularly stimulated by the idea of a study stay abroad. This finding supports the theoretical premise that learners enjoy engaging in language learning at any time and in any location, as suggested by Lai and Zhao (2006). The conclusions of our testing also indirectly confirmed the findings of Katrenko and Potapenko (2024), according to which the time-space barrier in foreign language teaching is being erased due to digitalization.

4.3 RQ3 - What type of study do clients prefer?

I can indicate that customers predominantly prefer a classical approach to their studies. The top preferences among clients include conversation-based learning (selected by almost 60 % of respondents), standard courses (53 % of respondents), and private lessons (36 % of respondents). These findings align with the teaching methods employed by language schools, which commonly utilize traditional instructional approaches.

Dependency between study type and country of origin

I also tested a hypothesis that examined the preferred study in relation to the respondent's country of origin (see Table 7). Based on the collected data, formulated the research question RQ3 ("What study type do clients prefer?") and subsequently tested the hypothesis SH3.

Tab. 7 - Study type in the context of countries of origin. Source: own research (2021)

	Croatia	Czechia	Latvia	Poland	Slovakia	*Total*
Camp	22 (28.59; -1.23)	0 (0.71; -0.84)	18 (11.9;1.77)	8 (8.88; -0.3)	8 (5.92;0.86)	56
Course	128 (109.77;1.74)	3 (2.73;0.17)	34 (45.68; -1.73)	38 (34.09;0.67)	12 (22.73; -2.25)	215
Conversation	133 (121.52;1.04)	2 (3.02; -0.59)	38 (50.57; -1.77)	40 (37.74;0.37)	25 (25.16; -0.03)	238
Discussion forum	14 (16.85; -0.69)	0 (0.42; -0.65)	9 (7.01;0.75)	5 (5.23; -0.1)	5 (3.49;0.81)	33
Language tourism	28 (29.1; -0.2)	0 (0.72; -0.85)	13 (12.11;0.26)	4 (9.04; -1.68)	12 (6.03;2.43)	57
Mobility	51 (57.18; -0.82)	1 (1.42; -0.35)	33 (23.8;1.89)	17 (17.76; -0.18)	10 (11.84; -0.53)	112
Private lesson	64 (80.16; -1.8)	5 (1.99;2.13)	37 (33.36;0.63)	30 (24.89;1.02)	21 (16.6;1.08)	157
Workshop/seminar	43 (39.82;0.5)	1 (0.99;0.01)	19 (16.57;0.6)	8 (12.37; -1.24)	7 (8.25; -0.43)	78
Total	483	12	201	150	100	946

Based on the test results, specifically with a test statistic of χ2(28, N = 946) equal to 51.54 and a p-value less than 0.01, I have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, I assume that there is a statistically significant dependence between the variables "study type" and "the respondent's country of origin." The Cramer coefficient, with a value of V (df = 28) equal to 0.12, indicates a weak dependency between the variables. Further analysis of the residuals revealed significant differences between the countries of Slovakia and Czechia. In Czechia, respondents selected the "private lesson" more frequently than expected. On the other hand, in Slovakia, respondents selected the "standard course" less frequently than expected and showed a higher preference for the "language tourism" option. These findings highlight notable variations in study type preferences between these two countries.

Testing hypothesis SH3

Another hypothesis was formulated to investigate the teaching methods preferred by language school clients. The assumption was that the traditional approach, represented by traditional courses, would be favored by most clients, while alternatives such as conversation-based learning, discussion clubs, or mobility options would have less preference.

Tab.8 - Results of hypothesis SH3 testing. Source: own research (2021)

Statistical hypothesis	X-squared	df	p-value
SH3: Most customers tend to classic courses (exceeding 50 % of respondents)	280.36	1	1

However, based on the test results, with a p-value greater than 0.05, I do not have enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, **I suppose that more than 50% of customers do not prefer traditional courses**, which does not fully support the initial theoretical premise that students strongly prefer face-to-face classroom activities (Johnson, 2015) or considering Bezerra's (2024) research, which revealed a strong tendency for students to return to in-person classes.

4.4 RQ4 - What form of study do customers prefer (in-person or online)?

Based on the analysis of the survey data, it was found that most clients, specifically 66% of them, tend to take full-time study courses. Additionally, 19% of the customers expressed a preference for online courses, while 15% of the clients indicated a need for a digital academy as their preferred mode of learning.

Dependency between form of study and country of origin

In addition to the previous analysis, the study also included testing a hypothesis that examined the preferred form of teaching in relation to the client's country. The research question RQ4, which aimed to understand the preferred form of study among customers (in-person or online), was derived from the data, and the hypothesis was subsequently tested. The results are listed in table 9.

Tab. 9 -Form of study in the context of countries of origin. Source: own research (2021)

	Croatia	Czechia	Latvia	Poland	Slovakia	Total
Digital Academy	30 (33.97; -0.68)	0 (0.75; -0.86)	21 (12.57;2.38)	7 (10.18; -1)	5 (5.54; -0.23)	63
Full-time study	143 (149.36; -0.52)	5 (3.29;0.94)	46 (55.27; -1.25)	59 (44.74;2.13)	24 (24.34; -0.07)	277
Online study	54 (43.67;1.56)	0 (0.96; -0.98)	17 (16.16;0.21)	2 (13.08; -3.06)	8 (7.12;0.33)	81
Total	227	5	84	68	37	421

Based on the test results, specifically with a test statistic of $\chi 2(8, N = 421)$ equal to 28.12 and a p-value less than 0.01, I have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Consequently, I will assume that there is a statistically significant relationship between the variables "form of study" and "the respondent's country of origin." The Cramer coefficient, with a value of V (df = 8) equal to 0.18, indicates a weak dependency between the variables. A closer analysis of the residuals highlighted significant differences between Latvia and Poland. In Latvia, respondents selected "digital academy" more often than anticipated. In contrast, respondents in Poland showed a higher preference for "full-time study" and a lower preference for "online study" than expected. These findings highlight distinct preferences for course organization between these two countries.

Testing hypothesis SH4

In addition to the previous analysis, I also tested a hypothesis to examine whether language school clients prefer in-person or online teaching. My assumption was that the majority of students should prefer the traditional form of teaching, namely face-to-face instruction.

Tab. 10 -Results of hypothesis SH4 testing. Source: own research (2021)

Statistical hypothesis	X-squared	df	p-value
SH4: Majority of customers prefer face-to-face teaching (exceeding 50 % of respondents).	41.387	1	< 0.01

Based on the test results, specifically with a p-value less than 0.05, I have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, I suppose that more than 50% of customers prefer face-to-face teaching, supporting the notion that most clients prefer in-person instruction. The stated results are slightly contrary to the findings of Gangahagedar et al. (2021), who found that some learners favored traditional classroom-based instruction, while others expressed a preference for online language courses. These conclusions are complemented by an empirical study by Cubillos (2007), according to which there were no significant differences in the performance of students in any of the ability measures under consideration, but that the hybrid format was largely favored by these college learners due to its autonomy and flexibility.

4.5 RQ5 - What course content do customers prefer?

I investigated the preferences of customers regarding the content of their learning experience. I asked them about the type of content they desired. Based on the results of my survey, it can be concluded that the most customers surveyed (58.9% of the total) preferred foreign language content. Furthermore, 43.7% of the total clients expressed a preference for personal development content, while 34.7% indicated a desire for interactive content. However, it was found that clients did not show much preference for courses focused on areas such as art, tourism, etc.

Dependency between course content and country of origin

In addition to the analysis, I also tested a hypothesis that examined the relationship between the definition of course content (as indicated in response to the question "what course content would you be interested in?") and the origin of the respondents (represented by the variable "in which country do you study a foreign language?"). From the collected data, I formulated the research question RQ5 ("What course content do customers prefer?") and subsequently tested the hypothesis below. The findings of this testing, specifically exploring the relations between course content and the respondents' country of origin, are shown in table 11.

Tab. 11 - Course content in the context of countries of origin. Source: own research (2021)

	Croatia	Czechia	Latvia	Poland	Slovakia	Total
Art	24 (33.23; -1.6)	0 (0.64; -0.8)	12 (11.7;0.09)	23 (13.57;2.56)	6 (5.85;0.06)	65
Business/ management	65 (60.84;0.53)	1 (1.18; -0.16)	22 (21.42;0.12)	22 (24.85; -0.57)	9 (10.71; -0.52)	119
Current events	30 (35.79; -0.97)	1 (0.69;0.37)	16 (12.6;0.96)	14 (14.62; -0.16)	9 (6.3;1.08)	70
Foreign language	128 (127.3;0.06)	4 (2.47;0.98)	47 (44.82;0.32)	45 (52; -0.97)	25 (22.41;0.55)	249
Informatics	33 (30.16;0.52)	0 (0.58; -0.76)	4 (10.62; -2.03)	16 (12.32;1.05)	6 (5.31;0.3)	59
Interactive content	78 (73.62;0.51)	1 (1.43; -0.36)	28 (25.92;0.41)	24 (30.07; -1.11)	13 (12.96;0.01)	144
Personal development	102 (89.47;1.32)	1 (1.73; -0.56)	29 (31.5; -0.45)	30 (36.54; -1.08)	13 (15.75; -0.69)	175
School-leaving exam preparation	26 (30.68; -0.84)	1 (0.59;0.53)	6 (10.8; -1.46)	22 (12.53;2.68)	5 (5.4; -0.17)	60
Tourism/ gastronomy	49 (49.08; -0.01)	1 (0.95;0.05)	18 (17.28;0.17)	19 (20.05; -0.23)	9 (8.64;0.12)	96
Vocational subjects according to your own choice	33 (37.83; -0.79)	1 (0.73;0.31)	18 (13.32;1.28)	17 (15.45;0.39)	5 (6.66; -0.64)	74
Total	568	11	200	232	100	1111

Based on the test results, specifically with a test statistic of $\chi^2(36, N = 1111)$ equal to 41.37 and a p-value greater than 0.05, I do not have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Consequently, I will assume that there is no statistically significant dependence between the variables "course content" and "the respondent's country of origin." A detailed analysis of the residuals uncovered significant differences within Latvia and Poland. In Latvia, respondents were less likely than expected to choose the option "informatics." Meanwhile, in Poland, respondents showed a higher-than-expected preference for both "arts" and "school-leaving exam preparation." These findings highlight distinct preferences for course content within these two countries.

Testing hypothesis SH5

The final aspect of this study investigated the content preferences of language school clients. I sought to verify the assumption that most clients are not interested in learning a foreign language in conjunction with the development of other skills, such as personal development or professional contexts. My expectation was that, based on the existing offerings of language schools, clients would lean towards language courses exclusively, without the inclusion of broader skill development opportunities.

Table 12 Results of hypothesis SH5 testing. Source: own research (2021)

Statistical hypothesis	X-squared	df	p-value
SH4: Majority of customers prefer language teaching without a professional context (exceeding 50 % of respondents).	337.12	1	1

Based on the test results, specifically with a p-value greater than 0.05, I do not have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, wI suppose that the majority of customers, more than 50%, do not prefer language teaching that lacks a professional context. These conclusions are not mutually exclusive with theoretical findings. Compe (2024) found that students have persistent difficulties in both productive and receptive skills, which may be indirectly related to the lack of contextual teaching methods. According to Bada and Okan (2000), there is a significant tendency among students for course content to focus on the development of both receptive (speaking) and productive skills (knowing and learning about culture, art, sports, personal development in foreign language).

The results of this empirical study can be summarized on two levels. At the level of dependence of selected variables on the country of origin, it was shown that there is a statistical dependence between the role of the client, the place of study, the type and form of study and the selected E.U. countries in which this research took place. In other words, this means that the roles and preferences of language school clients differ in different E.U. countries. For the practice of language schools, the recommendation follows from this finding that it is necessary to examine the clients of LS in the context of the specifics of local markets. This is the only way to match the offer of language schools with the needs of individual E.U. markets. The second level of research then led to the rejection of four out of five tested statistical hypotheses. It turned out that it is not possible to clearly define the clients of language schools on the basis of a certain characteristic (role, age, etc.) or a prevailing tendency to evaluate their preferences, with the exception of the form of study where personal teaching is preferred.

Taking a closer look at research centered on language school clients, several key assumptions emerge, shedding light on their preferences and interests. Firstly, it challenges the prevailing belief that most language school clients are students (who I define as primary and secondary school students). Contrary to this view, the research indicates that the majority of clients do not fall into the student category. This finding contradicts the common understanding of language schools and may be partially consistent with the theoretical finding that adults are a significant client group for language schools, as highlighted in studies by Wang and Parkvithee (2018) and Rice and Stavrianos (1995). Secondly, while most language school clients are not motivated to learn by the prospect of studying abroad, this does not imply a lack of interest in this form of education. Interestingly, one-third of the respondents express their interest in studying abroad. Consequently, it can be anticipated that clients will lean towards informal learning environments, considering the abundance of data supporting various learning categories (such as learning at home, online, or at work). Another significant finding is that most language school clients seek alternatives to traditional courses centered on vocabulary, grammar, and exercises. This tendency is highlighted by Jordan and Long (2022), who emphasize that good language teaching requires knowing how people learn, and that current English language teaching (ELT) practice largely ignores this crucial question. The customer perspective reveals to me that customers actively look for approaches that prioritize conversations and interactive learning. This preference aligns with the findings of Ali et al. (2022), who discovered that students exhibit a strong inclination towards face-to-face classroom activities. On the other hand, according to the findings of Cubillos (2007), there are no important differences in the results achieved regarding face-to-face teaching and online teaching. In general, some students prefer the classical form of education, while others prefer the online form (Gangahagedara et al., 2021). Therefore, it is highly debatable to say that language school clients generally prefer face-to-face teaching over online teaching. Nevertheless, there are some studies indicating a general inclination towards in-person learning experiences (Andrews et al., 2023). However, blended learning approaches, which combine face-to-face instruction with online components, are gaining popularity and being increasingly implemented in practice (Rasheed et al., 2020).

Lastly, the research reveals that most language school clients have broader learning interests beyond solely acquiring a foreign language. This contradicts the current offerings of language schools, which typically focus on developing language skills (such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and incorporating cultural aspects of the target language (Slinták, et al., 2022). Clients seek a more comprehensive approach that encompasses additional dimensions of learning, indicating a desire for a more holistic educational experience.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the customers of language schools and thereby redefined the basic characteristics of the language school market. Based on data analysis, I focused on examining the profile of customers in relation to the respondent's country of origin and their prevailing preferences. It was found that there are statistical dependencies between the characteristics of language school customers and the country of origin of the respondent, except for the factor related to course content. On the other hand, it was also found that there are no statistically significant prevailing tendencies (i.e., a factor occurring in more than 50% of respondents) related to a specific characteristic or preference of language school clients, except for the form of study. From this, it can be concluded that the main goal of this study was achieved, and the results of this study can contribute to a better understanding of the specifics of the language school market in terms of customer profiling and the innovation of language school business models.

The limitation of this study is related to the spatial realization of the research, as the study focused only on selected E.U. countries (Central Europe), and the respondents from these countries were not evenly represented in the statistical sample due to the different possibilities that the individual partners of the research project had to approach the clients of the language schools (some partners had direct access to the clients, while others did not). Another limitation of this study is the size of the data sample (n = 421) and the method of verification, as the research questions and statistical hypotheses were tested based on a single methodology. Nevertheless, I believe that the results of this study have provided interesting findings about the language school market and its customers, which can serve as a stimulus for future research focused on the field of language education.

Based on the findings derived from this study, future research will focus on factors that may influence the preferences of language school clients. In this context, it will be examined whether there are statistical dependencies between selected characteristics of language school clients (such as age, gender, etc.), learning experiences, and their expectations regarding the type, form, and content of study. Future research and its results should contribute to a better understanding of the specifics of the language education market and the related market segmentation.

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