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**VERB FORMS – CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR**

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*Abstract*

Each language has its specific grammar system for expressing the three really existing time dimensions – past time, present time and future time. The existence of different conceptions of grammar categories of verb in different languages makes the process of learning foreign languages quite demanding. Trying to answer the main research question ‘How can foreign language teachers use their learners’ already acquired knowledge about verb forms?’, the authors refer to their own teaching experience and to theoretical methodological findings, and support the idea of teaching foreign languages not in an isolated way but using a systematic confrontation of the languages the learners are familiar with and using their learners’ linguistic competence. The study is based on the previous research carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic) whose aim is to improve the effectivity of teaching and learning of English and German verb forms in the Czech educational environment. The authors compare the systems of Czech, English and German verbs and come to the conclusion that through suitably chosen instructions referring to their learners’ already acquired knowledge about verb forms, teachers can effectively motivate these learners to constructive using of their already existing linguistic abilities and skills.

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## 1. Introduction

The current dynamic social development and the process of globalization and unifying of the European society is connected with the necessity of the European citizens' communicative abilities and competences development. The knowledge of only the mother tongue is not sufficient for a successful communication within Europe. Although each European nation has to keep and develop its native language, the ability to successfully communicate in at least three languages is required by the European Union's educational authorities.

Learning at least one foreign language in which it is possible to communicate with other nations is traditionally rooted in the school syllabi and curricula of so called small nations. Czech, for example, is currently spoken by 13.2 million people. It is the mother tongue for 10.7 million of them, 2.5 million people speak Czech as their second language. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the world's population was 7,482 billion on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2018<sup>1</sup>, according to the Worldmeters, the number was even 7,632 billion on that date<sup>2</sup>. From these figures it is clear that knowledge of foreign languages is absolutely necessary for Czech people in the present world. English language has currently the dominant position among foreign language taught at Czech schools. It is the first and compulsory foreign language for all Czech school-children, who start learning it at the elementary school level or even earlier. Currently, the second foreign language (most frequently German) occurs in curricula of lower secondary schools. Methodological issues of foreign language teaching are not ignored; teachers realize that "it is important for a teacher to acquire methods based on students' own work. These techniques emphasize students' own thinking and problem solving." (Heinrichova, 2017, p. 185). Teachers should be aware of the fact that "an ideal and universal method of foreign language teaching which would enable reaching all the goals of the given teaching process actually does not exist" (Besedova, 2017). However, the efforts made to find methods which will make our learners' learning process faster and more successful will definitely pay in future and will make our teaching career more effective and more enjoyable.

When learning a foreign language, learners consciously or unconsciously transfer their experience, knowledge and skills acquired during the process of learning their mother tongue to the process of learning that particular foreign language. When learning further foreign languages, this transfer is "enriched" by experience, knowledge and skills acquired during the process of learning the previous foreign language/s. The question is "whether these learners are aware of their ability to use the potential of the positive transfer, and whether they are able to transfer their already acquired language skills into the process of learning other languages sharing some equivalent features" (Tauchmanova, 2014). We have been researching this issue for several years. University students of various age levels and various specializations have been asked about their awareness of their ability to use the potential of the positive transfer. One of the questions was: "In which sphere/s of your current learning of foreign languages (i.e. the spheres of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, reading, writing, speaking) are your skills and experience gained during your earlier language studies helpful?" Surprisingly, there were a few unexpected negative reactions (Tauchmanova, 2017): "Certain knowledge of other languages makes my learning process even more

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.census.gov/popclock/>, <https://magazin.gnosis.cz/lidska-populace/>, accessed on 13. 7. 2018

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.worldometers.info/cz/>, <https://magazin.gnosis.cz/lidska-populace/>, accessed on 13.7.2018

difficult.” or “I am not able to profit from my previous studies. I think that they make me even more confused.” Although a majority of the respondents reacted positively and were able to find at least some of their already existing skills and knowledge as useful, we cannot be satisfied with learners’ general awareness of the existence of positive language transfer. It is important to mention the fact that foreign language learners are much better aware of the issue of negative interference resulting from their knowledge of other languages.

As it has been already mentioned, when studying foreign languages, learners consciously or unconsciously transfer their already gained linguistic experience into the system of the language currently studied. Czech native speakers studying English and German do that as well. When comparing English, Czech and German, it is possible to find certain similarities and various differences at all language levels (orthography, morphology, syntax, lexicology, etc.). These similarities and differences occurring in these three languages can result both in positive transfer and in negative interference. According to Ondrakova (2016, p. 107), the most difficult task is “... to remove the interference in the spheres of discourse and text organisation because, being influenced in a culturally specific way, learners transfer conversation and communication techniques typical of their mother tongue into these spheres. It is highly important to know the learners’ first language (their mother tongue) and to be aware of their knowledge of other languages when assessing the interference in their foreign language performances.”

Although Czech, English and German are Indo-European languages and share certain linguistic features, each of these languages has its specific grammar system. The existence of different conceptions of grammar categories in these three Indo-European languages makes the process of learning them quite challenging and demanding.”

Both the authors of this paper work as educators and trainers of pre-service and in-service foreign language teachers. Jana Ondrakova is the head of the Department of German Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove and Vera Tauchmanova is a member of the academic staff of the Department of English Language and Literature at the same institution. They want to increase teachers’ and students’ awareness of a potentially positive use of previous foreign language studies. In the time period of 2016 – 2017 they coordinated the research project called “The impact of English on other foreign languages studied” which was supported by the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove. The research was focused on impacts of the knowledge of the first foreign language (English) on the process of learning further foreign languages (German, as the most frequent second foreign language in the Czech Republic, was in the centre of their attention). This paper refers to the aforementioned research and develops its ideas and findings.

The topic of this paper is connected with teaching grammar, which is definitely not an easy issue. As Swan says (2012, p. 122), “the teaching of grammar can be something of a conceptual maze, full of confusing questions relating to problems of selection and methodology”. When trying to answer the question ‘Why do people worry so much about grammar teaching?’, Swan reveals more issues (Swan, 2012, pp. 122 – 123): “The trouble with teaching grammar is that we are never quite sure whether it works or not: its effects are uncertain and hard to assess. If we teach rules, sometimes students manage to apply them and sometimes they don’t. Practice may have some effect, but carry-over to spontaneous production is often disappointing. ... Research on methodology is inconclusive, and has not shown detectable, lasting and

wide-ranging effects for implicit versus explicit instruction, for inductive versus deductive, or for separated-out study of structure versus incidental focus on form during communicative activity.” Hopefully, this text will bring some ideas which will be successfully applicable by both teachers and learners of foreign languages. We expect our opinions and ideas to be discussed and further developed by our colleagues and by our present and future students.

As for the theoretical background, Our research has been inspired and motivated by long-term research activities carried out by Janikova (2011), who has been dealing with teaching and learning more foreign languages and the dominant position of English among the other foreign languages taught at Czech schools. She sees learners of the second foreign language as being “more systematic and more conscious about their learning process, and as having better analytical abilities” (p. 137). The dominant position of English as the current foreign language No. 1 in the Czech Republic is commented by Janikova (2011, p.136) in the following way: “The only thing we can do is to respect English as the foreign language No. 1 and to refer to it while teaching other foreign languages.” Overall, Janikova (2011) considers the experience and abilities acquired in the process of learning English as fruitful for learning other foreign languages. However, this fruitfulness cannot be expected automatically: “Learners who are not willing or not able to accept and constructively use and develop their multilingualism cannot profit from it. ... Motivation plays an important role in this sphere.” (p.137). This opinion is quite essential for us and was reflected already in the first phase of our research into the possibilities of applying learners’ already acquired knowledge of foreign languages on their learning of other foreign languages, which is expressed in Tauchmanova et al. (2017, p. 9): “The foreign language teachers’ ability to use their learners’ positive experience and learning habits acquired during their previous studies is absolutely essential. Through conveniently chosen instructions connected with applying this experience on further studies, teachers can motivate their learners to constructive using of the already acquired abilities and skills. Obviously, the teachers themselves have to be aware of the process of language acquisition with both its positive and negative features.”

Swan and Smith’s (2001) findings about interlanguages and language interference are very important for our considerations within the framework of comparing Czech, English and German. Swan and Smith are referred to also later in the text; at this point we feel important to mention the following opinion of theirs (p. xi): “However, equivalences are rarely exact, and so-called ‘interference’ or ‘transfer’ mistakes are common where students assume a more complete correspondence than exists, so that they carry over mother-tongue patterns in cases where English forms or uses are not in fact parallel.” This opinion was expressed in connection with learning English as the first foreign language. However, we can consider it as universal and applicable on the process of learning further foreign languages, making just a small modification: the wording ‘they carry over mother-tongue patterns’ can be modified into ‘they carry over mother-tongue patterns and patterns known from other languages’.

Dealing with the issues of contrastive analysis of languages, of language transfers and interference in the Czech environment, we can refer to and we can take inspiration from the method invented by Nepustil between 1981-1983. This psychologist and educationalist specialised in teaching English and German; his method is based on logical thinking and conscious acquisition of grammar, on active drilling and on reading of original texts. In the first half of the 1980s, Nepustil was comparing pairs of languages and he designed

tables referring to grammar tenses used in Czech, German and English. These tables will be referred to and applied in the text below.

Last but not least, the following principles taken from Ur (2013, pp. 4–5) are considered by our research team as being useful and recommendable while presenting and comparing grammar issues of foreign languages: “it is helpful to teach grammar systematically; it is helpful to have an explicit rule available for a grammar point being learnt; learners will benefit from focused practice”.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Our research activities are closely connected with our professional career of foreign language teachers’ educators and with our essential objective – to educate and train our students in such ways which will make them become good teachers. This paper focuses on the issue of revealing and/or proposing potential ways of how to make the use of the knowledge and experience gained by the learners in the process of learning verb forms in their first foreign language when teaching them verb forms existing in further foreign languages. Foreign language learners should be stimulated to apply their previous knowledge and experience when learning other foreign languages. We are convinced that the efforts made to reveal negative impacts and to find ways how to decrease the interference impact and eliminate “unnecessary” errors, as well as the efforts to find ways of using positive transfers are definitely demanded and welcomed in the process of teaching of foreign languages in the present multicultural and multilingual society.

## **3. Research Questions**

We asked two essential research questions to be answered in this paper. The first one was: Are learners of more foreign languages aware of similarities and differences existing in the sphere of the grammar categories of verb in the systems of the Czech, English and German grammars? The second and main research question (closely connected with the first one) was: How can foreign language teachers use their students’ already acquired knowledge about verb forms? The findings resulting from the answers are presented in the sixth part of this paper.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

This study is based on and it is further developing our previous research results and findings published by experts in the methodology of foreign language teaching. Its main aim is to present the facts and findings whose implementation could improve the effectivity of teaching and learning of English and German verb forms in the Czech educational environment.

Our research activities were to a big extent motivated by the following opinion expressed by Janikova (2011, pp. 136–137): “Until recently, different foreign languages were taught separately. The ways of teaching the first foreign language were not different from those applied when the second or further foreign languages were taught. The teaching materials offered very few or no stimuli for making the use of the knowledge and experience gained by the learners in the process of learning the first foreign language. Moreover, foreign language teachers had not been trained for such interconnections.” We agree with Janikova and, being educators of pre-service and also in-service teachers of foreign languages, we would

like to train our students' abilities to find the required interconnections. Our aim is to make these teacher trainees able of using positive transfers of the already acquired knowledge and skills. The purpose of this study is thus to present a kind of contrastive analysis of verb forms existing in three languages – Czech, English and German. We strongly believe that the findings resulting from this analysis will be helpful not only for teachers presenting the issue of English and German verbs to Czech native speakers but also for Czech learners of English and German.

Verb forms were chosen to be contrastively analysed in our research for two reasons. The first one is the fact that they are the in the centre of attention of foreign language textbooks. We fully agree with Parrott's opinion reacting to a frequent argument expressed by people concerning a rather 'excessive' attention devoted to verbs in foreign language textbooks (Parrott, 2015, p. 138): "English language courses generally pay a great deal of attention to different forms of verbs and people often argue that this attention is excessive. However, as teachers we still need to know and understand the full range of forms and uses." The second reason resulted from our two-year research activities mentioned above. A big number of the respondents involved into the research considered the sphere of verb forms and verb tenses as a sphere in which a lot of problems caused by language interference occur, but also as a sphere in which it is possible to use positive transfers.

## **5. Research Methods**

The prevalingly used methods were those of qualitative analysis and of comparative analysis applied in the process of seeking and reading of appropriate sources available in the sphere of current teaching more foreign languages and teaching grammar of foreign languages, specifically English and German in the Czech environment. The presented opinions and findings are also based on semi-structured interviews carried out with pre-service foreign language teachers during their courses in English grammar and in German grammar offered by the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic).

Thirty pre-graduate students majoring in teaching English and German (25 females and 5 males) aged from 20 to 25 were interviewed after completing their tests in English morphology and in German morphology. Within the framework of the semi-structured interviews, the students were asked to find mistakes in their German test, respectively their English test, caused by the English interference, resp. German interference (if there were such mistakes). In connection with that, the interviewed students were asked to come up with certain suggestions how to prevent this type of interference errors in future. The second task given to the students during the interviews was to identify some verb forms which are similar in both the languages. The students considered this task as quite challenging and most of them came up with ideas of using these similarities for a more effective teaching process. At the end of the interviews the students were asked to make comments on the English / German verb forms which they considered to be the most difficult, and to try to reveal causes of the problems.

## **6. Findings**

When Michael Swan speaks about tasks faced by language teachers, he emphasizes the tasks of prioritising and selecting (Swan, 2012, p.57): "Most learners only have time to master a small part of a

foreign language. Our task is therefore 1) to prioritise, selecting the language and skills which are most important for our learners, and 2) to ensure that our learners engage with the language skills selected in ways which will ensure that they are effectively learnt.” These tasks seem to be even more important when one person studies more foreign languages. In this case, the tasks of prioritising and selecting are even more challenging for foreign language teachers.

Prioritising and selecting should be, simultaneously, connected with the application of convenient teaching strategies. Having in mind the issue of contrastive analysis (which is focused on in this text), we find Lightbrown and Spada’s following opinions as highly important (Lightbrown & Spada, 1996, p. 105): “... second language teachers can (and should) provide guided, form-based instruction and correction in specific circumstances... Teachers should be specifically aware of errors that the majority of learners in a class are making when they share the same first language background. Nor should they hesitate to point out how a particular structure in a learner’s first language differs from the target language. Teachers might also try to become more aware of those structures which are just beginning to emerge in the second language development of their students and provide some guided instruction in the use of these forms at precisely that moment to see if any gains are made.”

The publication called “Atlas jazyků” presents interesting information (Comrie et al., 2007, p. 25): “Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when certain family relationships were discovered within the framework of Indo-European languages, language classifications have been presented and illustrated through genealogical tables. The position of English in the Indo-European languages’ family tree proves a close kinship between English and the neighbouring European languages. Then we can consider English and German as “language sisters” sharing their parents; English and French can be considered as “cousins” sharing an Indo-European ancestor but having different language parents.” Based on this comparison made by Comrie, Matthews and Polinsky (2007, p. 25), Czech can be also considered as a kind of “cousin” to English and German. Thus, it can be expected that the aforementioned desired guided instructions can be based on more numerous similarities between English and German, which result from their closer kinship, and/or less numerous similarities between these two languages and their Czech “cousin”.

### **6.1. Awareness of similarities and differences when comparing Czech, English and German verbs**

This awareness was researched into during seminars in German grammar and in English grammar. This kind of research was motivated by conclusions made during the aforementioned 2-year research project, which are summarised by Tauchmanova (2017, pp. 2725 – 2730): “It is obvious that university students definitely tend to compare their previous achievements in learning foreign languages with their present learning experience. But it seems difficult for them to reveal causes of their success and failures. The research process shows that students are not used to thinking about their own learning skills transferrable into other learning processes.”

A vast majority of Czech native speakers learning English and German claim that English grammar system is much easier than that of the other two languages. However, the number of English tenses is rather “discouraging” for the learners. When being directly asked about their awareness of similarities between German and English verb forms, our pre-service teachers of these two languages most frequently mentioned: in both the languages there are irregular verbs, German and English have more grammar tenses

than Czech, English and German verb tenses and passive voice are formed in a similar way, modal verbs are quite similar. Not until the students were asked to think about using these similarities in their teaching practice, did such an idea come to their minds. This situation seems quite challenging for methodologists of foreign languages.

Our students of German are aware of their errors made in that language due to the English interference. They consider the existence of that 'close family relationship' as rather contra-productive sometimes. More or less the same opinion was expressed by Swan and Smith (2001, p. xi): "Since transfer mistakes arise where the systems of two languages are similar but not identical, they are most common (at least as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned) in the interlanguage of students who speak languages closely related to the target language."

## 6.2. Czech, English and German grammar tenses

This subchapter is connected with our second research question through which we made pre-service teachers of German and English think about a potential use of positive transfers in their teaching practice. The aforementioned answers concerning similarities from the sphere of English and German verb forms inspired us to make Table 01. illustrating similarities and differences in the ways in which the three languages express the three really existing times (past, present and future). Czech native speakers are quite often in trouble – their mother tongue distinguishes just three grammar tenses, whereas German has six tenses for expressing the three time dimensions, and English even doubles this number of tenses since it has the simple version and the continuous one for each of its six basic tenses. For pragmatic reasons, the table uses the grammar terminology commonly used in the three researched languages:

**Table 01.** Grammar tenses for expressing the time reality in English, Czech and German

	Grammar tenses		
Time (reality)	English	Czech	German
<b>Past:</b>	Past perfect simple Past perfect continuous Past simple Past continuous	Préteritum	Plusquamperfekt Präteritum Perfekt
<b>Present:</b>	Present simple Present continuous	Prézens	Präsens
<b>Future:</b>	Present simple Present continuous Future simple Future continuous Future perfect simple Future perfect cont.	Futurum	Futur II Futur I

There are two important facts to be mentioned in connection with Table 01. The first one is that the table ignores a possibility of using modal verbs (e.g. modal 'used' and 'would' for expressing past time in English) and it also ignores using of other tenses due to grammar rules applied in certain structures (e.g. English 'future in the past', tenses used in English conditional clauses, etc.). The other fact is even more important within the framework of this study – one English grammar tense, present perfect (in its simple

and continuous version), is completely missing in the table. (Therefore “only” ten English tenses are listed in the table although the total number of twelve tenses were mentioned in the text above). The reason for not including this tense into the table can be more or less explained by the following opinion expressed by Parrott (2015, p. 235), who says that it is a form “that can refer to present time in some contexts, and past time in others.” Nepustil (2011) labelled this tense as “aktuálně minulý”, which can be translated into English as “currently past”.

Parrott realizes difficulties with teaching the English present perfect tense and he recommends (2015, p. 235) teaching its use to refer to present time (‘uncompleted actions or events’) separately from its use to refer to past time (‘completed actions or events’). Parrott (2015, p. 235) also recommends “teaching this tense through comparison with closely related tenses”. This recommendation of applying a comparative method in teaching is in accordance with our approach. The present perfect tense does not exist in Czech, however, in case of some verbs a literally translated “have/has + past participle” structure can be appropriately used in Czech (the sentence ‘I have paid the invoice.’ can be literally translated into Czech as ‘Mám zaplacenou tu fakturu.’). As it has been already mentioned, the English present perfect tense is very unpopular with Czech learners of German, and there are two reasons for that: 1) this tense does not exist in their mother tongue and 2) the German form which is structurally identical with the English present perfect simple is used for expressing past time. This “double” interference increases the number of errors in English spoken by Czech native speakers learning German.

Referring to comparative analysis applied in teaching foreign language verb forms, we decided to modify Nepustil’s tables in which the structures of “only” two languages were compared (English – Czech and German – Czech) and to create tables in which a kind of comparison of three languages is presented. Table 02., which was inspired also by Ondrakova’s tables on pp. 69 – 80 (Ondrakova, 2014), is one example which, in our opinion, can help Czech foreign language learners better understand the structural and semantic part of English and German verbs.

**Table 02.** Verb “to finish” in all existing active forms of English tenses and their equivalents in Czech and German

Grammar tense	English	Czech	German
Future	he will finish he will be finishing	on skončí on bude končit	er wird enden
Future Perfect	he will have finished he will have been finishing	on dokončí on bude dokončovat	er wird geendet haben
Present	he finishes he is finishing	on končí on dokončuje	er endet
Present perfect	he has finished he has been finishing	on skončil on dokončil	er hat geendet
Past	he finished he was finishing	on skončil on dokončoval	er endete
Past perfect	he had finished he had been finishing	on skončil on dokončoval	er hatte geendet

The table clearly shows that English simple tenses are structurally quite close to German verb forms, whereas Czech verb forms with their complicated derivational morphemes are different. In our opinion,

this table can be useful for teachers of German as the second foreign language – they can refer to their learners' existing knowledge of structurally similar structures occurring in English. Both teachers of English and teachers of German can use this table (or parts of it) when comparatively clarifying the situations in which particular tenses are used. Last but not least, the learners' awareness of Czech derivational morphemes can be improved as a kind of “a positive side effect”.

Our research activities have been influenced by findings made by Swan and his term ‘pedagogic rules’, which seems to be quite important for foreign language teachers. By ‘pedagogic rules’ Swan (2012, p. 45) means “rules which are designed to help foreign-language learners understand particular aspects of the languages they are studying (whether these rules are addressed directly to the learners, or to teachers and material writers who are expected to pass on the rules to the learners in one form or another, is immaterial).” The aim to help their learners understand the language studied is really essential for teachers and their priority should be to become aware of these rules and to apply them in their teaching practice. The six rules mentioned by Swan (202, pp. 46 – 55) are: truth, demarcation, clarity, simplicity, conceptual parsimony and relevance. Our tables in which verb forms of three languages are compared are, hopefully, not in conflict with these rules.

## 7. Conclusion

We completely agree with the aforementioned opinion expressed by Janikova (2011) concerning the fact that teaching materials offer very few or no stimuli for making the use of the knowledge and experience gained by the learners in the process of learning the first foreign language.

Through suitably chosen instructions referring to their students' already acquired knowledge about verb forms and verb tenses and to their previous experience with these grammar issues existing in the languages already studied by them, foreign language teachers can effectively motivate their learners to constructive using of the already built abilities and skills in this sphere of grammar. Our research is still at its beginnings, tables comparatively illustrating other issues from the sphere of grammar categories of verbs are still being designed. However, positive reactions expressed by our students preparing for their teaching career show a prospective fruitfulness of our efforts.

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