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**THE MOTIVATION OF CZECH PUPILS TO LEARN GERMAN AS
ANOTHER FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

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Abstract

The ability to communicate in foreign languages is one of the key competences of a man in today's modern society. However, learning a foreign language within the institutional education requires sufficient time, will and especially motivation, which is an essential prerequisite for the effective learning process. Since 2013, pupils of Czech elementary schools (ISCED2) have been obliged to learn two foreign languages. After English, which is the first foreign language in the Czech education system, a compulsory additional foreign language comes in the seventh or eighth grade (pupils aged 12-14). Although official documents speak of the possibility of choosing another foreign language, more than half of the students learn German. The following paper presents the results of a research carried out in the school year 2018/19, which tried to shed light on the reasons why pupils choose German as another foreign language, although German is perceived as a difficult and harsh sounding language in the Czech Republic. The results show different intentions of choosing German as another foreign language, and are presented within the context of the language policy in the Czech Republic, which officially supports the European multilingualism.

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Keywords: Foreign language, German, motivation, Czech pupils.



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1. Language policy of the European Union and the Czech Republic

The knowledge of foreign languages is nowadays perceived as an integral part of the education for people in modern society. The Czech Republic has been a member of the European Union for 15 years now and thus belongs to a developed community of countries which currently has almost half a billion people, consists of 28 states and speaks 24 official languages. It is therefore natural that language learning is perceived as an important priority within the European Union and, as part of its efforts for intercultural understanding, the European Commission in cooperation with the national governments seeks to meet the ambitious goal of supporting European Union citizens in developing multilingualism. For the EU, multilingualism is also an important element of the European competitiveness, and therefore one of the objectives of the language policy is to ensure that every European citizen can speak two other languages in addition to their mother tongue. Respect for linguistic diversity represents a core value of the EU, as does the respect for human personality and openness to other cultures (Facts and figures about the EU, 2018). Multilingualism is one of the founding principles of the European Union and such approach is rather unique and unparalleled in other international organizations and within the policies of multilingual state.

2. Problem Statement

The Czech Republic belongs to the smaller European countries and therefore the principle of multilingualism is absolutely essential. The ability to communicate with not only European citizens in their own language constitutes a crucial point of further economic, social and cultural development of the Czech Republic. Despite such importance, the language policy of the Czech Republic that should reflect the principles of European language policy cannot be evaluated as consistent. This is evident not only from its recent past, but also from the present state. In the Czech Republic, the European concept of multilingualism - also known under the abbreviation 1 + 2 (the knowledge of one's mother tongue plus two foreign languages), has been facing some difficulties. After almost a decade, when English was usually taught as the only compulsory foreign language at the elementary and most secondary schools in the Czech Republic (e.g. Jiřička, 2012), there was a change after the pressure of the professional and general public, and another mandatory foreign language was returned to the syllabus. However, since 2013/2014, this change only affects the second stage of the Czech elementary schools (ISCED 2, lower secondary education), while secondary schools (ISCED 3, upper secondary education) are not obliged to do so (Müllerová & Schönherr Poláčková, 2013). The question remains to what extent the objectives of the European language policy are being met within the Czech Republic and how these developments will be reflected in the further development of the country.

3. Research Questions

Finding out the reasons for choosing German as another foreign language at the elementary schools in the Czech Republic was the essential interest in carrying out a research that would shed some light on this situation. As part of the research, elementary school pupils in the East Bohemia region were asked a semi-structured question: What were the reasons for your choice of German as another foreign language?

4. Language policy at elementary schools in the Czech Republic

Language learning, as well as the order in which foreign languages are offered in individual countries as part of the institutional education, is usually determined in each country based on its own political, economic and cultural-social conditions. However, a country's international relations and its involvement in other regional networks also play an important role. The fact that English became the first foreign language in the European countries provides a clear example. English is currently perceived as the modern lingua franca, especially on the basis of the principle of usefulness. Therefore, even in the Czech Republic, English is usually taught as the first foreign language (L2) and classes mostly begin in the third grade of primary schools (pupils aged 8-9). Teaching of another foreign language comes later - according to the RVP for the elementary schools (basic educational plan for the elementary schools) its teaching must be included in the eighth grade (usually pupils of 13-14 years) with the range of three classes per week, or it is recommended to include it in the seventh grade (usually pupils of 12-13 years) with the range of two classes per week. Another foreign language may be German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Slovak, Polish, or a completely different language. The primary position of English is supported by the fact that English as another foreign language must be offered by the school to the pupils who did not choose English as their first foreign language (RVP ZV, 2017).

4.1. German in Czech schools in the period 1990-2019

Given the history of the Czech Republic and its current economic, political, cultural and geographic conditions, it is quite logical that German is one of the favourites among other foreign languages. German was being taught in schools together with the Russian even during the Communist regime in the Czech Republic, because the German Democratic Republic was part of the block of the communist countries in Europe. German language enjoyed a great popularity in the Czech Republic even after the fall of the Iron Curtain (1989), when the borders were opened. The possibility of leaving to the former West Germany or getting a very well-paying job there (in comparison with the Czech situation) was a strong motivating element for learning German. In the early 1990s, the number of pupils learning German was much higher than the number of pupils learning English. As a result of this steep interest, there was a significant increase in the number of German teachers as well; not only by increasing the number of students of the pedagogical faculties, but also by retraining former Russian language teachers who no longer had employment possibilities in their original field. At the end of the 1990s, the change in the ratio between the numbers of those interested in learning German and English in favour of English took place, and since the year 2005 the position of English as the first foreign language has been anchored in the legislation of the Czech Republic, which is also reflected in the number of pupils learning foreign languages.

4.2. German compared to other languages in the school year 2016/2017

Despite these developments, German is still the most frequent choice as the second foreign language, as evidenced by the statistics of the Czech Statistical Office. In the school year 2016/2017, 176 504 pupils were studying German, which represents 22.3% of the total number of pupils in the elementary schools (ISCED2) learning a foreign language. The Russian language has been slightly gaining in popularity in the

recent years due to many parents believing that Russian is easier to learn because of its similarity to Czech as a Slavic language. In the same school year, 52,002 elementary school pupils were studying Russian, which represents only 6.6% of the total number of students learning a foreign language. Other languages that still appear in the statistics of the Czech Statistical Office are Spanish and French. With 6 492 pupils (Spanish) and 6145 pupils (French), both represent only a small percentage - both languages only 0.8% (Základní školy v krajském srovnání, 2019). It can therefore be stated that German as another foreign language still occupies an important place within the institutional education at the level of primary schools in the Czech Republic.

4.3. The importance of German in the current Czech Republic

German, however, has not best reputation in the Czech Republic (e.g. Procházková, 2009). It is very often perceived as a harsh sounding, hard to learn language, and is unfortunately still associated with the Czech Republic's negative period of the World War II. Despite these prejudices, the knowledge of German is currently perceived as a great asset of job seekers (e.g. Francová, 2015). There are hundreds of German companies operating in the Czech Republic (especially in the field of engineering, automotive industry, etc.) that expect at least a basic knowledge of German. As the surveys of the Czech-German Chamber of Commerce show, in recent years the language skills of the job seekers in these companies are not reaching the required level or they are completely absent. The need for the knowledge of German and at the same time the interest in improving the language skills of Czechs in the field of the German language education is confirmed by the fact that the Austrian and German embassies have begun to support teaching German together with the general interest in studying German in the Czech Republic within the last five years, for example by the language campaign "Šprechtíme". Beside many other events, this campaign arranges annual trips to bigger Czech cities, where it organizes cultural and social events for the general public, open discussion forums for the public, students or prospective students of the German language and the meetings with important representatives of the region (in the fields such as industry, culture and education). The aim of this campaign is to support the teaching of German at all types of schools and to improve the perception of the German language as not just a language of the past but as the language of modern, democratic and culturally and economically developed countries in Europe.

The effort to find out the reasons that despite the situation described above lead current elementary school pupils, especially from the East Bohemia region, to choose German as another foreign language has become the central issue of our research.

5. Research Methods

A questionnaire survey was used to carry out the research. Within this framework, respondents - pupils of the Czech elementary schools (ISCED 2) from 7th to 9th grades, respectively from 8th to 9th grades (pupils aged 13-16) - were asked to answer a semi-structured question: what reasons led them to choose German as another foreign language within their education. In answering the question, the respondents could use the offered answers and choose the pre-formulated reason, or they could - in case

that none of the options suited them and did not correspond with the reason for their decision - provide other reasons that led them to choose German. There were five possible answers:

- 1) I wanted to learn German
- 2) My parents wanted me to learn German
- 3) There was no other option at my school
- 4) German is taught by a good teacher
- 5) I will have a better chance of getting a good job

In the case of inconsistency with any of the given reasons, the respondents could formulate their reason in the section entitled: Other reasons. Respondents could also add a comment to the selected reason, specifying the choice in their own words. In addition to the questionnaire survey, short, semi-structured interviews with German language teachers of the given students were also carried out to confirm or refute the acquired findings.

5.1. Realization of research

At the beginning of the research, two hypotheses were formulated, based on the long-term experience of the author:

H1: At least one third of the pupils addressed had to choose German as another foreign language because there was no other foreign language offered at their school.

H2: At least one third of the pupils addressed chose German as another foreign language because they genuinely wanted to learn German.

The research question was asked to more than 800 pupils at the second level of the Czech elementary schools: What were the reasons for your choice of German as another foreign language? The question was asked and answered in writing, guaranteeing the anonymity of the respondent. The respondent's identifying features were only his/her school, grade, gender and the number of years he/she has been studying German. For internal specification, after collecting the questionnaires the researchers also noted down the specific teachers of the given classes so that they could formulate questions more accurately in the following interviews to verify or refine the acquired data. The survey was carried out in the school year 2018/2019 at 15 Czech elementary schools in the region of East Bohemia and North Moravia. As these regions are not close to the German-speaking border, it can be assumed that the frequent opportunities for contact with the German-speaking population are considerably limited, and therefore the motivation for learning German may be different and rather lower than in the regions bordering with Germany or Austria. At the end of the survey, it was found that out of 806 participants in the research 801 responded appropriately and five questionnaires returned unanswered or inappropriately answered (e.g.: I am not interested in this at all). Although the questionnaire did not explicitly state that students should choose only one answer as the reason of their choice, 79% of respondents indicated only one reason in their answer. Almost 12% of the respondents (91 pupils) stated more than three reasons, with the most common combination (85% of the questionnaires that were answered in such way) being the answers 1, 4 and 5. The obtained responses were

statistically processed and short semi-structured interviews with the German language teachers of the students were conducted afterwards, with the aim to confirm or refute the acquired knowledge from the perspective and experience of the teaching staff.

6. Findings

The results of this research are presented hierarchically according to the number of responses obtained.

6.1. There was no other choice of the foreign language at my school

The data showed that almost half of the respondents (exactly 48.8%) did not choose German as another foreign language. Nevertheless, they had to be learning German (eventually they are still learning) because there was no other option at their school and the second foreign language is a compulsory subject, as stated in the legislation. This situation is typical for smaller village schools in the region, where the offer of other foreign languages is greatly limited by the structure of the teaching staff, which also resulted from personal interviews with the teachers. Other foreign languages are offered according to the availability of qualified teachers working in the given schools, which is currently usually only German or a choice between German and Russian. In fact, there are still many older teachers working in schools nowadays, who usually studied Russian even before the Velvet Revolution and are therefore qualified for this language. The relatively sufficient number of qualified German language teachers in the Czech Republic is due to both the situation in the 1990s (see above) and also the existence of more than 17 institutions preparing the future German language teachers. As the research revealed, the size of the school logically plays an important role in the selection of another foreign language as well. For example, if there was a choice between Russian and German in certain schools and some pupils wanted to choose Russian, they had to switch to the German language group for the capacity reasons regardless, as too few students applied for Russian and the school could not afford to finance a small group of only several pupils. Such fact is not very favourable for the German language teachers. Indeed, if pupils enter the educational process with the feeling of injustice that they wanted to learn another language and now have to learn German instead, it certainly will not contribute to an adequate motivation for the subject. Teachers need to put in a lot more effort and skills to suppress the negative feelings of students of not being able to learn the desired language and to strengthen the positive feelings of learning another language. The question remains whether all teachers are really capable of facilitating this process and whether this task is feasible at all in the environment and conditions of the institutional education. Another question arising from the conclusions of the research is whether the elimination of motivation due to the necessity to learn another foreign language without the possibility of choice could not, unfortunately, caused the frequent pupils' lack of interest in German language, as demonstrated by the research results of the author conducted in 2017/18.

6.2. I wanted to learn German

The second biggest group (30%) consisted of the respondents who chose German because they genuinely wanted to learn the language. Respondents' comments showed that at some schools two languages were offered (German and Russian), and there were very different reasons expressed for students'

preference of German over Russian, for example: I did not want to learn Cyrillic; German will be more useful in my life; German is better than Russian; Russian is a dead language, German is more useful and I will have better chance of being accepted to high school; we often go to the Alps; we have relatives/friends in Germany; I will make better use of German in my life; there are more Germans than Russians in the Czech Republic; with German I will be able to communicate better within Europe, I find Russian difficult; my parents can speak German; there is a better chance for me of going to Germany than to Russia, etc. It can be assumed that the motivation of pupils who have opted for German themselves will be significantly higher than that of pupils with other reasons for their choice. This group can be expected to enter the German learning process with certain positive expectations, and it depends mainly on the teachers whether they will not only maintain this interest, but also support or deepen it in the long term to ensure the quality of their pupils' knowledge of German corresponds with the investments connected with this process. However, the importance and the role of society in enabling pupils learning German to actually use their acquired knowledge in real life should not be overlooked. According to the research carried out in 2013 (Müllerová & Schönherr Poláčková, 2013), there are not many opportunities in the Czech Republic outside of Prague. This applies both to the media scene and also to the possibility of meeting German-speaking people, for example in the form of native speakers at schools. The possibility of pupils traveling to German-speaking countries has proved to be a very positive aspect, which is very often one of the great motivating moments for further language learning. However, as confirmed by the interviews with the German language teachers, the conditions for pupils going abroad within the school programs are not perceived very positively by today's teachers, which cannot be seen as a helpful attitude of the state towards its citizens in terms of the importance of foreign language skills of the inhabitants from a small European country. The crucial question, however, is whether these pupils will have the possibility to continue their studies of German after entering high school. As mentioned above, the teaching of another foreign language is usually optional at the level of the secondary education, so it may happen that a two- or three-years investment of both the student and the society may come to nothing. This fact certainly does not strengthen students' motivation to take a responsible approach towards learning another foreign language, as well as it does not support the quality work of teachers of these languages, especially at the pedagogical-psychological level. As the interviews with the teachers confirmed, German language teachers very often struggle with students' opinions such as: why do I have to learn another language when I speak English everywhere, or: why do I have to learn German now when I will not need it at all in high school.

6.3. I will have better chances of getting a good job

The pragmatic advantage of knowing German for their future career was identified as the reason for choosing the German language by 200 pupils, which represents 25% of the respondents. On one hand, this observation suggests that pupils at this age are not likely to think so intensively about their future career yet, because it is still in a distant future for them. On the other hand, this finding may indicate that a certain group of pupils is even at this young age already aware, that foreign language knowledge is an essential part of the skillset nowadays if you want to work not only at the national but also at the international level. Several important German companies with international operations (Siemens, Skoda Auto - part of the Volkswagen Group, Kiekert, etc.) have their presence in the region where the survey was conducted and it

can be assumed that some of the parents of the respondents work in these companies linked to the German-speaking countries. The awareness of the significant pay gap in e.g. Škoda Auto Company compared to the other companies is relatively high in the Czech Republic, so it is quite logical that pupils with ambitions to work in these sectors are aware of the advantages of knowing German.

Given the fact that this answer belongs to the group of relatively frequent combinations of answers 1, 4 and 5, it is also possible that it represents a group of more powerful students planning to study at the university. Students can perceive higher education as a form of education providing good employment and therefore also requiring adequate foreign language skills.

6.4. German is taught by a good teacher

A specific group (18%) is formed by the group of respondents who have identified German language teacher's good reputation as the reason for choosing another foreign language. The number of these respondents (144 in total) is almost identical to the number of pupils of two German teachers, at whose school the research was conducted. The interviews with these teachers (one male and one female) revealed, for example, that both teachers have a great sense of humour and they also apply it in their lessons, they organize various atypical activities for pupils both within the school and as part of the extracurricular activities, organize trips to German-speaking countries etc. The teachers themselves were also aware of their positive influence on the students, for they spoke about situations from which such attitude of their students was evident.

As an illustration, situation can be described where pupils from lower grades come to ask whether the specific language teacher will also teach German in the year when the obligation to choose another foreign language falls on them. If so, they would like to choose German. The teacher's statement regarding the pupils' relationship to German was also very eloquent. When he asked one of his classes whether they liked learning German, he was told that they did not, but that they liked him. At the same time, both educators argued that they were rather strict teachers and required adequate results from their students. It is common knowledge that a teacher plays a significant role in the life and development of the children and adolescents and can have a strong influence on them. As the results of our research show, a strong and positive personality can also influence the choice of the subject and quite fundamentally affect the pupil's further development.

The academic literature clearly demonstrates that a positive emotional climate promotes the positive development of the pupil's abilities, skills and his relationship with others, as well as enabling the pupil to approach the learning in a positive way and with genuine interest (e.g. Čáp & Mareš, 2001; Butzkamm, 2004). It is therefore questionable whether teachers (not only of foreign languages) can be well prepared to handle this demanding profession in such a way that ensures the pupils of their specific subjects approach their learning positively and with interest, given the inadequate financial and social conditions of the teachers in the Czech Republic. Of the 18 teachers in whose classes the research was conducted, the number of two teachers that are so positively perceived by the pupils does not represent a great share.

6.5. My parents wanted me to learn German

Only less than 12% of the respondents expressed a major influence of their parents on their choice of German as another foreign language. Given the age of pupils when they have to choose another foreign language in primary school (usually 12 years old in the seventh grade or 13 years old in the eighth grade), it is somewhat surprising that this is a relatively low number. The reasons for that can be examined from different points of view.

On one hand, it may be that pupils at this age no longer take their parents' wishes into account and decide under the influence of other circumstances (limited choices at school, peer pressure, etc.), on the other hand, it is possible that especially in small rural schools – as the above results have shown – parents do not even interfere with the choice because the school either does not offer different language options at all or the choice is very limited.

7. Conclusion

Hypotheses Verification

Two hypotheses were formulated in the preparation for the research

7.1. Hypothesis 1

At least one third of the addressed pupils had to choose German as another foreign language because there was no other foreign language offered at the school. This hypothesis was confirmed, because the results of the research showed that the choice of another foreign language at Czech schools in the East Bohemia region is limited and almost half of the pupils-respondents really had to choose German as another foreign language due to no other option available.

7.2. Hypothesis 2

At least one third of the pupils addressed chose German as another language because they actually wanted to learn German. Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed, because indeed one third of the pupils chose German as another foreign language because they genuinely wanted to learn it.

7.3. Distant ideal

Motivation is an integral part of all human actions, which implies that it is also an integral part of the learning process. Positive motivation (one's own resolution and determination, efforts to achieve something, the joy of success, etc.) is especially important for learning. The possibility to choose the content of one's study program can significantly support this positive side. In the process of learning foreign languages, the need for motivation and the possibility of applying the acquired knowledge is absolutely essential for effective learning. If the motivation is suppressed, e.g. in the form of an involuntary choice, it is possible to expect a decrease in the interest in the given subject, which can logically be reflected in the results of the educational process. The example of our research has shown that the offer of the selection of another foreign language for lower secondary school pupils (ISCED2) in the Czech Republic seems

formally generous, but in reality, is very limited and inconsistent. Therefore, as a matter of fact, the ideas of the Czech political representation formulated in the legislative documents – the ability of the country's citizens to speak at least two other foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue – remain only a distant ideal under the present circumstances.

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