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PROBLEMATIC ENGLISH AND GERMAN VERB FORMS
TAUGHT TO CZECH NATIVE SPEAKERS

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Abstract

According to the documents issued in the sphere of the educational policy of the united Europe, all citizens of the European Union should be able to communicate not only in their native language but also in at least two foreign languages, the first of which is English, the current Lingua Franca. In the Czech Republic, the German language is the most frequent second foreign language chosen by the country's inhabitants.

The text focuses on more problematic German verb forms taught to Czech native speakers whose first foreign language is English. During the process of our long-term research and our professional practice we have revealed that visually clearly presented contrastive analysis of languages can help our students to learn the target languages more effectively. Having analysed errors made by advanced learners of German in more complicated verb forms, we decided to compare these structures with the structures expressing the same grammar meaning in Czech and English. The issue of the German Konjunktiv can be claimed as really problematic for Czech learners of German. We tried to reveal whether frequent mistakes made by Czech students in their performances in German result from the impact of their mother tongue and their first foreign language (English). The presented ideas and opinions will be hopefully helpful for preventing Czech learners of German and English from making mistakes.

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1. Introduction

Although all citizens of the European Union should do their best to keep the highest standard of their mother tongue and to positively develop their native language, the “mere” knowledge of the mother tongue is not sufficient nowadays. According to the documents issued in the sphere of the educational policy of the united Europe, all citizens of the European Union should be able to communicate not only in their native language but also in at least two foreign languages, the first of which is English, the current *Lingua Franca*. If the United Kingdom really leaves the European Union, English will not be the mother tongue of any citizen of the European Union, and this *Lingua Franca* will be used by all the EU’s citizens as their (first) foreign language.

The choice of the second foreign language to be learnt should be made carefully. The two most decisive factors impacting this choice are the list of the existing official languages of the European Union (i.e. the fact that a particular language is on that list), and the geographical factor (the languages spoken in the neighbouring countries). The factor which should not be neglected is a chance of a better professional career for which a particular language is demanded.

Due to the geographical position of the Czech Republic, the German language is the most frequent second foreign language chosen by the country’s inhabitants. In the Czech Republic there are numerous international companies owned by German speaking owners, numerous Czech people commute to work to Germany and Austria. There are projects of the cross-border cooperation, German speaking people use the service of Czech companies, make appointments with Czech doctors or go to Czech hospitals. Also the historical factor is important for the choice of German as the second foreign language. German has been the official language on the territory of the current Czech Republic several times. There are numerous germanisms in the Czech language (e.g. ‘*flaška*’, ‘*mašinka*’, ‘*maširovat*’,...), expressions of the Czech origin appear in German (especially Austrian German), e.g. expressions referring to the semantic field of cuisine (‘*Buchtel*’, ‘*Kolatsch*’, ‘*Powideln*’).

Methodologists of foreign languages try to find the most convenient and the most effective ways of teaching. They do not ignore the fact that the process of learning a foreign language is always impacted by the knowledge of the learner’s mother tongue and by the knowledge and abilities gained during the process of learning all the previous foreign languages. This impact can be both of the negative and of the positive nature. Both the authors of this paper educate and train under-graduate and in-service teachers of foreign languages. Jana Ondrakova has been a long-term head of the Department of German Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic); Vera Tauchmanova works at the Department of English Language and Literature at the same institution. Their main research sphere focuses on teaching grammar of German and English, respectively, and on impacts of the knowledge of the first foreign language (English) on the process of learning the second foreign language (German).

This study focuses on more problematic German verb forms taught to Czech native speakers whose first foreign language is English and whose German is at the upper-intermediate or advanced level. We hope that our experience and ideas presented in this study will be fruitful for both teachers and students of German and English.

2. Problem Statement

During their compulsory school attendance, Czech pupils of lower secondary schools have to learn at least two foreign languages, which can be rather problematic for them, especially due to the existing of language interference. These learners are expected to learn and properly use the systems of two different foreign languages, and, moreover, their learning processes are also significantly impacted by the knowledge and experience gained through the previous process of acquiring and learning their mother tongue. In learners' minds, these linguistic systems and the already gained linguistic experience mix together, which results in the formation of interlanguage. There are numerous definitions of this phenomenon; one of the shortest is the one used by Swan and Smith (2001) – they refer to interlanguage as to “the variety of a language that is produced by non-native learners” (p. ix). During the process of learning more foreign languages, the learners' interlanguage is constantly developing, but still it is really systematic.

Referring to the process of learning foreign languages in the Czech Republic, we can claim that the most typical type of interlanguage is that resulting from mutual impacts of Czech (the mother tongue), English (the first foreign language) and German (the most frequent second foreign language). Since the interlanguage is systematic, errors appearing in it must be obviously systematic as well. This fact is quite significant for the teaching process. As Tauchmanova (2016) says: “If foreign language teachers are aware of this phenomenon, then a more effective teaching process can be expected” (p. 562).

We got inspired by Nepustil, a Czech educationalist who specialised in teaching English and German in the Czech environment, and during the process of our long-term research and our professional practice we have revealed that visually clearly presented contrastive analysis of languages can help our students to learn the target languages more effectively. Moreover, clear presentations of similarities and differences existing in the studied languages can make the learners' interlanguage closer to the target language.

Having analysed errors made by advanced learners of German in more complicated verb forms, we decided to compare these structures with the structures expressing the same grammar meaning in Czech and English. These comparisons will be hopefully helpful for preventing Czech learners of German and English from making mistakes.

3. Research Questions

There was one essential research question in the centre of our research: Can the errors which are made in particular German verb forms by Czech students explained by language interference? The main method applied with the purpose to answer this question was that of contrastive analysis.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to continue our research aiming at revealing and outlining potential ways in which teachers of German and English working with Czech native speakers can make their learners' learning process more convenient and effective. The learning process was not taken from the general point of view; it was intentionally limited to more complicated verb forms existing in German. Applying the method of contrastive analysis, we made efforts to reveal whether the errors in German

resulted from the negative impact of Czech and/or English (i.e. whether these errors resulted from language interference).

The purpose of our study was also to make our under-graduate students actively involved in research work, to make them think about the process of learning more foreign languages and to make them realise that it is highly important to teach grammar in a systematic way. We refer our students to Ur (2013): “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” (pp. 4 – 5). There are other authors worth mentioning in connection with our purpose of involving students into our research. One of them is Richards 2011, who claims that a crucial and essential aspect of the teaching profession is teachers’ ability “to engage in critical and reflective review their own practices throughout their teaching career”. Another author supporting students’ involvement into research is Crystal (2007) and his opinion: “Students can benefit from being taught to ‘learn how to learn’ foreign languages. ... They may also benefit from training in the kinds of basic skills involved in FLL” (p. 432). The last but definitely not the least author worth mentioning in connection with involving students into our research is Ur (2009): “Learning more about language and about how language works is a useful, productive and interesting activity: increasing one’s awareness – being more ‘alive’ to language - can bring considerable benefit, both personal and professional” (p. 8).

5. Research Methods

The three basic methods applied in our research was that of analysis of errors made in texts written by students learning German, that of research into the existing literature and findings, and that of comparative analysis.

5.1. Mistakes analysis

The academic staff of the Department of German Language and Literature corrected the tests written by students majoring in teaching German and English who were in their first year of the master degree’s study programme and whose grammar knowledge was tested. (The tested students’ task was to translate sentences from Czech to German.) Then four students involved in our research (three female students and one male student) of the second year of the same study programme were asked to select any specific type(s) of mistakes made in more problematic verb forms. The second task assigned to the researchers was to make comments on the mistakes from the point of view of the negative language transfer from another language (Czech and/or English), and/or to make comments on potential causes of the mistakes. The students were also asked to consider the already existing tables comparing the Czech, English and German tenses (see 5.2. subchapter) and think about designing similar tables concerning the chosen phenomena.

The team of our students found the issue of the German Konjunktiv as highly problematic for Czech learners of German, and this issue was chosen for further discussions and comments. The research team’s opinions, comments, recommendations and findings will be discussed in a more detailed way later in the text.

5.2. Research into existing literature and into already made findings

Starting this subchapter, we would like to refer to two opinions. The first one concerns contrastive analysis and the importance of applying a convenient strategy when teaching foreign languages: “Second language 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” (Lightbrown & Spada, 1996, p. 105). The second opinion concerns a highly pragmatic teaching approach supported by Swan and Smith (2012): “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” (p. 57).

In our research, we could draw from the research which had been carried out by ourselves. In 2018, we modified the tables designed by Nepustil. The tables clearly present how three different languages express the conception of three really existing time dimensions through different numbers of tenses (see Table 01).

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

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

(Ondráková & Tauchmanová, 2019, p. 622)

As it is clear from the table, Czech has the lowest number of tenses. However, even this language is still able to express the continuous and simple aspects and the contrast between finished and non-finished activities. The below given Table 02 shows that these phenomena are expressed through prefixes and suffixes added to verbs.

The researching students were provided with both Table 01 and Table 02, and they were asked to consider designing a similar table or tables presenting the forms of the German Konjunktiv and the verb forms or structures through which this German phenomenon is expressed in Czech and English.

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

Grammar tense	English	Czech	German
Future	he will calculate he will be calculating	on spočítá on bude počítat	er wird rechnen
Future Perfect	he will have calculated he will have been calculating	on bude mít spočítáno on bude počítat	er wird gerechnet haben
Present	he calculates he is calculating	on počítá	er rechnet
Present perfect	he has calculated he has been calculating	on spočítal on počítá	er hat gerechnet
Past	he calculated he was calculating	on spočítal on počítal	er rechnete
Past perfect	he had calculated he had been calculating	on spočítal on počítal	er hatte gerechnet

5.3. Comparative analysis

In connection with the tasks mentioned in 5.1. subchapter, the students from our research team compared the German verb forms which were problematic for Czech students of German with semantically equivalent forms and structures used not only in the Czech language but also in English. As it will be presented in the following text, these three languages are really different in expressing the considered phenomena, which makes both the teaching process and the learning process really demanding, and which can also explain why numerous errors and mistakes are made by Czech native speakers in their German performances. Moreover, our students made additional comments on mistakes which are made by Czech learners of English when translating the given structures and forms from Czech to English.

6. Findings

As it was mentioned above, the issue of the German Konjunktiv was considered as really problematic for Czech learners of German. We tried to reveal whether frequent mistakes made by Czech students in their performances in German result from the impact of their mother tongue and their first foreign language (English). Being better aware of potential causes of mistakes, we will be hopefully able to find not only potentially better ways of teaching German verb forms but also ways how to teach foreign languages in a non-isolated way.

6.1. Examples of mistakes made by Czech students of German

Analysing tests which focused on grammar translations from Czech to German, the research team decided to present the two below given examples of mistakes which were made in the reported speech (Konjunktiv I has to be used in the indirect speech in German). As it is presented below, the direct speech was used in Czech sentences; the tested students were asked to transform the direct speech into the indirect speech and present the translation of the resulting transformed version.

- *Reportér položil předsedovi strany následující otázku: „Jsou šance Vaší strany při příštích volbách velké?“* (The reporter asked the chair of the political party the following question: “Does your party have big chances in the next elections?”)

The correct transformation and translation is: *Der Reporter stellte dem Parteivorsitzenden die Frage, ob die Chancen seiner Partei bei der kommenden Wahl hoch seien.*

However, these mistakes appeared in the verb form in the dependent clause:

..., *ob die Chancen seiner Partei bei der kommenden Wahl hoch sind.* (Indicative was used instead of Konjunktiv I)

..., *ob die Chancen seiner Partei bei der kommenden Wahl hoch wären.* (A wrong form of Konjunktiv was used.)

..., *ob sind die Chancen seiner Partei bei der kommenden Wahl hoch.* (Indicative was used instead of Konjunktiv I + a wrong word order was applied.)

..., *ob seien die Chancen seiner Partei bei der kommenden Wahl hoch.* (The correct Konjunktiv I was used but a wrong word order was applied.)

- *Předseda odpověděl: „Zůstávám jako vždy optimistou.“* (The chair replied: “As always, I keep, being an optimist.”)

The correct transformation and translation is: *Der Vorsitzende antwortete, er bleibe, wie immer, optimistisch.*

The following incorrect structures appeared in the tests:

Der Vorsitzende antwortete, er bleibt, wie immer, optimistisch. (Indicative was used instead of the correct Konjunktiv.)

Der Vorsitzende antwortete, er würde, wie immer, optimistisch bleiben. (Present Conditional was used instead of the correct Konjunktiv.)

Der Vorsitzende antwortete, er würde bleiben, wie immer, optimistisch. (Present Conditional was used instead of the correct Konjunktiv + an incorrect word order was applied.)

The kinds of the typical errors can be summarised in the following way:

The tested students applied an incorrect word order. That can be explained (at least partly) by the language interference (Czech does not apply a different word order in dependent clauses, English changes the word order only in indirect questions but differently than the German language does).

The forms of Indicative were used instead of the required Konjunktiv. The explanation can be more or less the same - both Czech and English use indicative when transforming direct statements and direct questions into indirect ones.

A Konjunktiv form was used but instead of the form appropriate for the indirect speech, another form (expressing the conditional mood) was used by the tested students. These students are aware of the necessity to use the Konjunktiv in the reported speech, but they do not have a proper knowledge of the existing Konjunktiv forms and of the proper use of these forms.

In their additional oral comments, the students doing the research mentioned also problems and mistakes appearing in the English indirect speech created by Czech native speakers (mainly the necessity to change tenses if past events are reported, and the issue of the different word order in the reported

questions). An interesting phenomenon is worth mentioning at this point – Czech students of German sometimes have the tendency to apply the correct German word order in English dependent clauses, which is inappropriate, and which is a typical mistake made by German native speakers in their performances in English.

6.2. German Konjunktiv

There are actually two types of Konjunktiv used in German. The easier one to present and explain to Czech learners of German is Konjunktiv II since it expresses the grammar meaning of the conditional mood. Our research team designed the following Table 03 which illustrates how the conditional mood (German Konjunktiv II) is expressed in English, Czech and German.

Table 03. Conditional mood in English, Czech and German

Conditional mood	English	Czech	German
Present	he would calculate he would be calculating	on by počítal	er rechnete er würde rechnen
Past	he would have calculated he would have been calculating	on by byl (býval) počítal	er hätte gerechnet

There are at least some similarities between English, Czech and German appearing in the formal structure of the present conditional mood: English “would” is ‘equivalent’ to Czech “by” (in its all existing forms) and the German “würden”. Both English and German use the base form of the lexical verb after “would” and “würden”.

The German form of the past conditional does not use the verb “würden” (English still uses the verb “would”, and Czech still uses the forms of “by”). However, the German past conditional is formally similar to the English past perfect tense, which is used in conditional clauses referring to so called unreal past conditions. Our research team considers this fact as really worth mentioning.

The German Konjunktiv I expresses someone else’s opinion or it is used in the indirect speech. Neither Czech nor English uses a specific verb form in these cases, which is probably the most important cause of highly frequent mistakes made by Czech native speakers in the German Konjunktiv I. Hardly any illustrative comparisons can be designed when presenting Konjunktiv I. The following Table 04. shows that German Indicative has its own Konjunktiv I forms in three tenses:

Table 04. German Konjunktiv I

Tense	Indicative	Konjunktiv I
Future (Futur I)	er wird rechnen	er werde rechnen
Present	er rechnet	er rechne
Present perfect	er hat gerechnet	er habe gerechnet

7. Conclusion

When learning more foreign languages, learners often draw unconsciously from their previous learning experience and unconsciously apply their previously gained knowledge. This reality must not be ignored by teachers of foreign languages. Educators should do their best to prevent their learners from making mistakes resulting from language interference, and, on the other hand, teachers should make their learners aware of a positive language transfer.

It is effective to teach foreign languages not in an isolated way but to constructively use the already acquired language knowledge and skills. If a teacher can find any identical or similar features which are shared by the target language and other languages learnt by the learners, these identities or similarities are definitely worth mentioning and comparing (as it was illustrated on the examples of the German, Czech and English conditional mood). However, if certain semantic and grammar issues are expressed in varied languages in completely different ways, it seems helpful to present these issues as rather isolated phenomena without any links to the other languages already known by the learners (this can be the case of the German Konjunktiv I discussed in the text).

According to Besedova, Stockova and Seslerova, (2017) we must also take into account the socio-cultural, socio-economic situation of learners and educators, which plays quite an important role in the sphere of foreign language teaching and learning. Heinrichova (2017), for example, sees a potential improvement of the situation in a wider use of fiction in German classes, and careful choice of methods: "It is important for a teacher to acquire methods based on students' own work. These techniques emphasise students' own thinking and problem solving."

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