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**ENGLISH AND GERMAN FROM CZECH STUDENTS' POINT OF**  
**VIEW**

Jana Ondrakova (a)\*, Vera Tauchmanova (b)

\*Corresponding author

(a) University of Hradec Kralove, Rokitanskeho 62, 500 03 Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic.

Email: jana.ondrakova @uhk.cz

(b) University of Hradec Kralove, Rokitanskeho 62, 500 03 Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic.

E-mail: vera.tauchmanova @uhk.cz

***Abstract***

The text presents findings from a long-term kind of research carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). Reflecting the educational policy of the European Union, teacher trainers from the Department of German English Language and Literature and the Department of English Language and Literature make efforts to improve their ways of training future teachers of German and English. To make their learners' process of learning more foreign languages more effective, teachers should know how their learners really feel about learning more languages. This study focused on two essential research questions: "What are Czech native speakers' points of view concerning the compulsory learning of more foreign languages?" and "Are Czech learners aware of similarities and differences occurring in the linguistic systems of English and German?" The text presents and compares the opinions expressed by two groups of respondents in a questionnaire survey. The research has revealed that Czech learners of foreign languages are aware of problematic spheres of foreign language learning, they think about methods convenient for their learning process. However, they are not properly trained in a systematic way to use their already acquired linguistic knowledge and strategies when learning further foreign languages.

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## 1. Introduction

European peoples need to mutually communicate, and this mutual communication depends on the development of these peoples' communicative abilities and competences. This reality is reflected in the educational policy of the member states of the European Union – and the sphere of teaching of foreign languages is one of the key priorities. Stockwell (2007) commented on the fact that people living in the European Union are currently more or less automatically expected to be able to make themselves understood in more languages in the following way: *“The ability to speak more than one language is more common in the world than monolingualism”* (p. 11).

In all the member states of the European Union, at least one foreign language has to be taught as a compulsory subject at schools. Searching for and revealing of more effective ways of foreign language teaching is currently one of the key issues of numerous projects carried out within the framework of common educational policy of the European Union. This sphere is focused on in educational documents, one of the most significant of which is called *“Education and training in Europe: diverse systems, shared goals for 2010”*. The document was launched in March 2000 and it dealt with the issue of the educational policy in the united Europe. The strategic goal for 2010, as declared and approved by the European Council in Lisbon, was to make the EU: *“the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.”* Having joined the European Union (that happened in 2003), the Czech Republic started to share this goal. The above mentioned document clearly stated that people living in the European Union are expected to communicate not only in their native language but also in at least two foreign languages. It also calls for *“substantial changes in curricula and methods of teaching of foreign languages and for establishing closer contacts between teachers and learners of foreign languages and native speakers.”*

## 2. Problem Statement

Reflecting the aims of the European educational policy, Czech pupils attending lower secondary schools have to learn at least two foreign languages. (Learning more foreign languages during the first seven years of the compulsory school attendance is quite traditional in the Czech Republic, this tradition was established a long time before the country joined the European Union.)

We, as educators of foreign language teachers, completely agree with the above mentioned necessity to improve the existing ways of foreign language teaching. However, the process of teaching is inseparable from the process of learning. If the learners are passive and / or the ways of teaching are not convenient for them, the educational goals cannot be reached. To make their learners' learning process more student-centred and more effective, the teachers should know how their learners feel about learning. In our research, the learners' feelings about the issue of learning at least two different linguistic systems were focused on.

Thinking about the process of teaching and learning of more foreign languages, we refer to Crystal's opinion (2007): *“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). Another author whose opinion we completely agree with and whose opinion we refer to is Penny Ur: *“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.” (Ur, 2009, p. 7).*

Considering the above mentioned required process of learning two different systems of foreign languages, it is important to mention the fact that, actually, there are not “only” two different linguistic systems to be learnt and mastered. The learners’ native language, whose impact on learning the first, second (or potentially further) foreign languages is really essential, definitely cannot be ignored. According to Ondrakova and Tauchmanova (2018) “*the ability of foreign language teachers to use positive experience and skills which have been already gained in their students’ preceding learning processes is absolutely essential*” (p. 681). When learning foreign languages, learners consciously or unconsciously transfer their linguistic experience gained in the process of acquiring their mother tongue. The linguistic systems mix together, the result of which is so called interlanguage defined by Swan and Smith (2001) as “*the variety of a language that is produced by non-native learners*” (p. ix). It is important to stress at least one significant feature of interlanguage – it is highly systematic, even the elements which are actually incorrect in the target language are structuralized. It can be expected that awareness and analysis of interlanguage can be fruitful when clarifying the process of learning foreign languages. As Tauchmanova (2016) says: “*... If foreign language teachers are aware of this phenomenon, then a more effective teaching process can be expected*” (p. 562).

### **3. Research Questions**

There were two essential questions in the centre of our research. The first one was: What are Czech native speakers’ points of view concerning the compulsory learning of more foreign languages? The second essential question was: Are Czech learners aware of similarities and differences occurring in the linguistic systems of English and German?

The participants in our research were actually asked more than these two essential but rather generally formulated questions. Our aim was to make the respondents aware of their learning processes and to make them reflect on their linguistic experience. That is why we instructed the authors of the distributed questionnaire to ask more specific questions.

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

The main purpose of the study was to reveal the answers to the above mentioned research questions concerning opinions of learners of more foreign languages and concerning the fact whether and how much Czech learners of foreign languages are aware of existing similarities occurring in the linguistic systems of the English and German languages. Simultaneously, our research also aimed at outlining potential improvements of teaching and learning of foreign languages and at revealing potentially existing ways of more effective ways of training under-graduate teachers of foreign languages. That is why we involved Czech students majoring in teaching English and German into our research. These students were responsible for designing the questionnaire, distributing it to the respondents and analysing the answers.

We completely agree with 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*" (p. 3). While training future teachers of English and German at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (the Czech Republic), the academic staff of the Department of English Language and Literature and of the Department of German Language and Literature strive to support and develop these under-graduate teachers' abilities of self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Our purpose of the study reflects the above mentioned Lisbon Strategy. As it has been already mentioned, this document lists several recommendations how to make the process of foreign language teaching more effective. One of the recommended changes is inter-connecting and using the knowledge and experience gained by the learners during the process of learning their first foreign language and applying this knowledge into the process of learning further foreign languages. The abilities of the above mentioned inter-connection and application of the already acquired knowledge are essential for the profession of teachers of foreign languages. They must be trained in these abilities already during the courses of their under-graduate studies at universities. This requirement is reflected in projects of the specific research carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove from 2016 to 2019 and coordinated by Jana Ondrakova (the Head of the Department of German Language and Literature) and by Vera Tauchmanova (from the Department of English Language and Literature). The research focuses on ways in which the processes of learning English and German mutually impact each other. As is was mentioned above, students majoring in teaching English and German within the Master's degree study programme are actively involved in the research team's work.

## **5. Research Methods**

The basic method applied in our research was that of a questionnaire. This questionnaire was distributed to two different groups of respondents; the answers given by these two groups were compared.

We supposed that certain differences in opinions would appear since the average age of the respondents in the first phase was higher. The questionnaire survey was intentionally focused on our research questions. The answers given by the respondents were analysed also in the quantitative way.

### **5.1. Research sample**

Our research has been so far divided into two phases and has involved 322 respondents – 160 respondents in 2017 (the first phase) and 162 respondents in 2019 (the second phase). In both the phases, the respondents were asked to answer the same questions included into the questionnaire which is presented and discussed below.

In the first phase, elderly learners (students of so called University of the Third Age) were also involved. The average age of the respondents was 38. In the second phase, the average age of the respondents was 23. The majority of respondents were female beings in both the phases (106 females in 2017 and 120 females in 2019); the number of male beings was significantly lower in both the years (54 males in 2017 and 41 males in 2019). Before completing the questionnaire, all the respondents had had experience with learning at least two foreign languages at school. Our research revealed that the vast majority of the respondents started with learning their first foreign language at the age of eight, and they started learning their second foreign language at the age of thirteen (these average ages were the same in both the phases of the research).

## 5.2. Questionnaire

In the first phase, the questionnaires were distributed in the paper form (this form is still more convenient for elderly students). In the second phase, the questionnaires were available in the e-form on the internet. (The e-form of the questionnaire was used intentionally – the second phase of the research focused on younger respondents, who definitely prefer electronic media when communicating).

Trying not to influence the respondents' opinions, the authors of the questionnaire decided to use a majority of the questions with open answers. The questions to be answered by the respondents were divided into two sets. The first set was linked with our first main research question and consisted of three questions:

1) Considering the issue of learning foreign languages at primary and lower secondary schools, would you personally prefer learning one foreign language with a higher number of classes per week or would you prefer learning two foreign languages with a “standard” number of classes per week?

2) Considering the issue of learning more foreign languages, which age would you recommend for starting to learn the first foreign language and then for starting to learn the second foreign language?

3) Considering the issue of learning foreign languages at primary and lower secondary schools, which learning / teaching activities and methods are, in your opinion, the most fruitful?

The second set of three questions / tasks was designed to reveal the respondents' opinions linked with our second main research question:

4) In which spheres has your experience which was gained during the process of learning your first foreign language helped you in the process of learning your second foreign language?

5) Make a list of grammar phenomena appearing in both English and German.

6) Give examples of mistakes you have made in German due to the negative transfer from English.

## 6. Findings

Our findings will be presented in two sub-chapters. The first one will deal with the first set of the questions, the second one will focus on the set of questions / tasks referring to the respondents' knowledge and abilities already gained in the previous learning process. The answers given by the first and second group of the respondents will be compared.

### 6.1. The respondents' opinions on learning more foreign languages at school

The first question “Considering the issue of learning foreign languages at primary and lower secondary schools, would you personally prefer learning one foreign language with a higher number of classes per week or would you prefer learning two foreign languages with a “standard” number of classes per week?” was not an open question. The respondents who answered it in 2017 got split into two halves – 50% of them voted for more classes of one foreign language, the other 50% would prefer to learn two foreign languages (each of them taught in fewer classes). In 2019, 62% of the respondents preferred the first option – more classes of one foreign language. We consider the answers given in 2019 as rather surprising since we had expected the current younger generation to be more enthusiastic about learning more foreign languages.

The answers given by the respondents in connection with the age recommended for starting with learning the first and second foreign language were as follows: In 2017, a majority of the respondents (70%) recommended starting with learning the first foreign language (which should be English) at the age of three to six, and then starting with learning the second foreign language at the age of ten. In 2019, the respondents (surprisingly for us) recommended starting with learning English as the first foreign language later, at the age of seven or eight (after the learners have become solidly familiar with the linguistic system of the mother tongue). Then, according to the respondents in 2019, the ideal age for starting with learning the second foreign language is eleven or twelve (at the lower secondary school).

The answers given to the third question (“Which learning / teaching activities and methods are, in your opinion, the most fruitful?”) were more or less the same both in 2017 and in 2019. The respondents recommend focusing on conversation, they called for more numerous listening activities and a more frequent use of authentic materials in the target language, they also called for more frequent contacts with teachers who are native speakers of the target language.

## **6.2. The respondents’ awareness of similarities and differences occurring in the linguistic systems of English and German**

Concerning the desired improvement of the ways of training future teachers of foreign languages, the answers to the second set of the questions were more significant for us.

In 2017, 45% of the respondents claimed that their experience with learning the first foreign language did not help them to find a convenient strategy for learning their second foreign language. In their opinion, the knowledge of the grammar of one Germanic language does actually not have a positive impact on understanding the grammar of other Germanic languages. The other 55% of the respondents were neither negative nor positive about potential benefits of their previous experience with learning foreign languages. The respondents involved in our research in 2019 were a little more positive. 50% of them claimed that their knowledge of the linguistic system of their first foreign language (English) helped them in the process of learning their second foreign language (German), mainly in the sphere of vocabulary. However, the experience with learning the first foreign language did not help these respondents to find and apply a convenient learning strategy.

The answers to the fifth question (grammar phenomena appearing in both English and German) were more or less the same in 2017 and 2019. All the respondents mentioned the existence of irregular verbs, a bigger number of grammar tenses and the necessity to use articles with Nouns.

The answers given to the last question were similar in both the years. The mistakes in German resulting from the negative transfer from English appear, according to the respondents, most frequently in grammar (grammar tenses and the word order). The sphere of vocabulary and pronunciation was mentioned as the second most problematic.

## **7. Conclusion**

Our long-term research has shown that Czech learners of more foreign languages think about the activities and methods convenient for them in the process of learning foreign languages. They are also aware of problematic spheres and mistakes made in one foreign language due to the negative transfer from

another foreign language. The younger respondents recommend starting with learning the first foreign language not until the second or third school year and they prefer a better and deeper knowledge of one foreign language to a worse knowledge of more foreign languages.

To Ondrakova's opinion (2016)

Individual errors made in foreign language performances have varied distracting impacts. Errors in pronunciation can result in a serious disruption in communication even if the speaker masters the other spheres of the language. For this reason it is very important to start with the pronunciation training as early as possible and in the most careful way when teaching a language (p. 107).

However, the respondents have not been trained in a systematic way to use their already acquired linguistic knowledge and strategies, and they are not aware of a potential profit gained from awareness of similarities occurring in linguistic systems of Germanic languages.

We agree with numerous experts in the sphere of the methodology of foreign languages who call for teaching foreign languages in a non-isolated way. According to Besedova, Stockova, & 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. If learners of foreign languages are made more aware of the potential of positive language transfer, their process of learning foreign languages can become more effective.

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