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**ENDOGENEOUS FACTORS IN SLA WITH A FOCUS ON  
ATTITUDES**

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*Abstract*

The paper aims to investigate endogenous factors affecting SLA with a focus on attitude, while the research interest was centred around German language acquisition. The research goal was to find out about the attitudes towards German language acquisition in terms of the semantic space in lower and upper secondary schools. Moreover, the relationship between achievement and attitude is also examined, while the research focuses on differences between the strength and assessment dimension based on achievement; the semantic differential was used as a research tool. The research revealed rather a negative attitude towards German language acquisition, but indicated strong positive ties to the teacher, who became a central factor in learning.

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**Keywords:** Attitudes, foreign language, German language acquisition.

## 1. Introduction

SLA represents a highly individual process that is affected by a number of factors that appear as a major challenge for Didactics. As their division varies, it is important to note that Riemer (1997) differentiates between two groups: endogenous and exogenous. In addition, the exogenous factors are the ones related to the environment in which acquisition takes place, such as the teacher, classmates, methods etc. On the other hand, endogenous factors shape the learner's personality, emerging from the individual



while forming his/her style. These factors are individually distinct and interrelated and so may affect one another.

Innate language abilities, individual competences and social experience with language are also involved in the SLA process (Breyhl, 2000). Dörnyei (2005) expands the list of these factors to include fear, creativity, self-confidence etc. Furthermore, Jeuk (2011) also adds mother tongue acquisition.

Age is undoubtedly one of the most discussed and investigated factors in SLA and Neurodidactics brings the most up-to-date knowledge into this field by linking learning and human brain functions. Therefore, brain plasticity is at the forefront of the field of Neurodidactics. Moreover, current developments in this field show that the brain is flexibly organized and is able to transform. As the brain adjusts and adapts throughout life, there are certain periods when the learning process is far easier. Consequently, Matovcikova (2014) claims that SLA should be more effective in primary and secondary education and a foreign language can be learnt also at an older age.

Motivation is also an important factor as motivated learners are willing to put greater effort into SLA and it also shows the way a person behaves (Dörnyei, 2014). Furthermore, motivation is mostly aimed at the process and not at the product (Stranovská, 2011). SLA is a lengthy process that may sometimes seem like there is no end in sight and so motivation can dissipate fairly easily. The learner should proceed step by step and must also be inspired to make the next step. This theory is also supported by other authors, such as Riemer (2010) and Dörnyei (2014).

Emotions also affect SLA and it is not easy to define them as there are a great number of opinions about this series. Generally speaking, emotion is a mental, feelings-based state that can be positive or negative. Psycholinguistics is therefore focused on perception of foreign language expression, processing emotions and behaviour toward a foreign language and foreign culture. As a result, the teacher should be aware of the emotionality of his/her students, especially in situations where they are able to communicate without any barriers, which can often be caused by an affective filter. Krashen (1982) is the author of the hypothesis of the affective filter, which represents a mental block restricting the learner from perceiving input from the environment. As this fact is related to motivation, needs, attitudes and emotions, pupils' emotions should not be underestimated. It is therefore important to work with emotions and eliminate or minimize negative ones. Hascher (2005) suggests several ways of handling negative feelings: distraction, reassessment of experienced events, problem solving, self-reward etc. Moreover, it is also important to maintain positive feelings, eg. rewarding for positive aspects, prosocial behaviour, experiencing positive feelings.

Our paper is aimed at certain endogenous factors with emphasis on attitudes and exploring them in acquiring the German language. The main aim of the research was to find out what the attitude to German language acquisition was with regard to semantic space, and discovering the attitude in relation to pupil performance in acquiring the language.

### **1.1. Attitudes**

Attitude must be understood as a basic prerequisite in acquiring a foreign language. Attitudes are not innate but develop over the course of our life in response to experiences, and this remains true also for foreign language acquisition. A number of definitions exist from various authors, e.g. Osgood, Suci and

Tannenbaum (1957) who claim that an attitude is a predisposition to a reaction, containing also a judgemental component. Nakonecny (1999) defines attitude as an evaluative relationship to objects of reality. Simply said, it is the tendency of how an individual reacts to persons, objects or situations, with an emphasis on assessment.

Psychologists agree that attitude consists of three components, cognitive, affective and conative (Werth, Mayer, 2008). The cognitive component means that something is being assessed in a negative or positive way based on the person`s conviction; it is a set of opinions or convictions. The affective component represents an emotional component that refers to the emotions a person feels toward an object, while this relationship may not be of a rational nature. Furthermore, emotions represent the reason why attitudes have a motivational or demotivational character. The conative or behavioural component refers to the disposition to act for or against the target of the attitude. Individual behaviour indicates what attitudes are being cultivated towards the object.

Regarding the classification of attitudes, this is a complicated issue; when focusing on SLA, two types of attitudes need to be considered (Gardner, 1985) - the attitude to the language and the approach to teaching foreign languages. Garret (2010) connected three attitude components in relation to learning a foreign language, as follows: If we consider the attitude of a student to Spanish as a foreign language, we can talk about a cognitive component, meaning Spanish language acquisition can help a student better understand Spanish culture; on the other hand, the affective component implies that he/she looks forward to reading a book in Spanish; the conative component lies in the fact that it saves money on a Spanish course.

Orouilou and Vahedi (2011) investigated attitudes in foreign language teaching and they propose that it is significant to use various techniques in teaching that can improve student attitudes to foreign language acquisition. However, Kleppin (2002) claims that positive attitudes are not a guarantee of successful language acquisition. On the one hand, other factors can contribute to demotivating students, such as teaching materials or the teaching process itself. On the other hand, a good attitude to a language does not ensure that we are about to attend a new language course and learn it.

Considerable debate has arisen concerning the number of personality factors that allow us to predict and understand students` behaviour. Hough and Ones (2001, pp. 233-238) proposed a detailed review of this topic and suggested the following points: Tupes and Christal`s (1961) analysis of trait ratings in the contemporary foundation for the Big Five Factors. They have been mostly focused on different types of assessments, rating sources, language and culture. On the other hand, Tellegen and Waller (1987), R. Hogan and Hogan (1995), Hough (1992), and Saucier and Goldberg found a different set of seven factors model. Five of those factors corresponded to the Big Five, plus two additional factors. Saucier and Goldberg claimed that the satisfactoriness of the Big Five can be questioned in light of new criteria for judging the adequacy of structural models for personality attributes.

Moreover, personality traits such as conscientiousness and openness have also been to predict various educational outcomes, regarding course performance (Paunomen & Ashton, 2001), and agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness anticipate overall academic performance (Farsides & Woodfield, 2003; Poropat, 2009). Extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness have been said to predict grade point average, especially when students apply previously acquired knowledge to real life

settings (Lievens, Ones, & Dilchert, 2009). In contrast, Chamorro-Premuyic & Furnham (2003) claim that emotional instability or neuroticism is negatively associated with academic achievement. In addition to the Big Five, Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007 point at the fact that other traits such as grit of perseverance are also predictive of academic performance. Although these findings confirm the general significance of personality traits, there still remains a need to examine other individual level factors such as students' learning styles. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that a number of studies suggest that individual differences in learning styles are predictive of student performance (Lockart & Schmeck, 1984). According to Sternberg & Zhang (2001), matching learning styles to teaching methods increases academic achievement.

Despite substantial data supporting the importance of students' personality traits and learning styles on learning, little is known about the combined effects of these two variables in explaining academic achievement (Ferguson, James & Madeley, 2002). Furthermore, another factor, openness has been found to be related to learning styles that are positively associated with academic success (Farsides and Woodfield, 2003). Even though conscientiousness and openness were significantly correlated with learning styles and academic success, learning styles were not significantly related to overall academic success. Therefore, a lack of current research as well as inconsistency in findings calls for a closer examination of how individual differences in personality traits might be related to preferred strategies for learning and how these might influence academic achievement.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Problem statement aims to investigate endogenous factors affecting foreign language acquisition, while a research interest is centred around measuring attitudes in German language teaching.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research is aimed at the following research questions:

What are student attitudes to teaching German in relation to a strength and assessment dimension?

How are students attitudes to the German language related to their achievement in the German language?

For the purpose of this research, achievement is perceived as the grade in the German language that is granted to the particular respondent. Pupils were divided according to grades into three groups:

- Grades 1, 2 – excellent
- Grade 3 – average achievement
- Grade 4, 5 – weak achievement

### **3.1. Data collection and respondents**

The research was conducted in lower and upper secondary schools in Bratislava. 120 pupils at the age of 13-18 took part in the research, 74 girls and 46 boys. Respondents were given a questionnaire containing a test of semantic differential. The teachers assigned to each of them a grade from the German

language in order to compare students' attitudes against their achievement in the language. Result processing was followed by interpretation and research discussion.

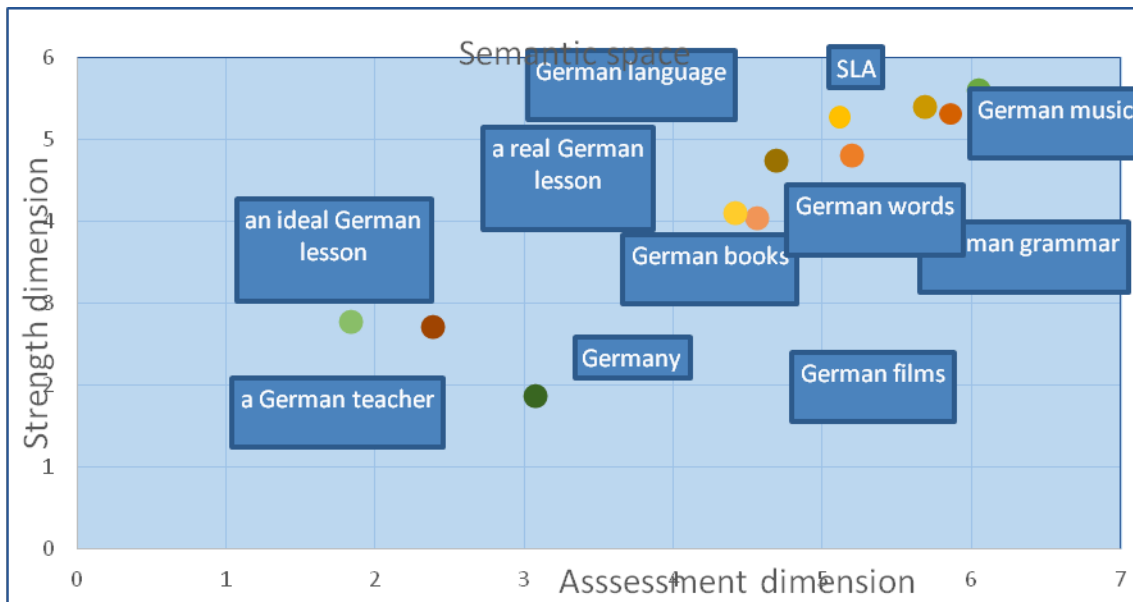
#### 4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to find out about students' attitudes towards German language acquisition with regard to the semantic space. In addition, a relation between the performance and attitudes is being examined, while the research is focused on differences between the strength and assessment dimension depending on students' performance.

#### 5. Research Methods

The method of a semantic differential was used in the research. It is a method that was developed by Osgood (1957) in the 1950s; this standardized method was originally used in psychology but can be modified also for different purposes. In linguistics it is being used to investigate connotations. Each series contains denotative and connotative significance. While denotative meaning represents the obvious, generally valid significance of a word, connotative meaning describes the subjective, hidden meaning of a word. The role of a respondent in this method is to express their attitudes to a particular series on a 7 degree scale, while he/she gets bipolar adjectives for it. Afterwards, it is possible to place the series into the semantic space.

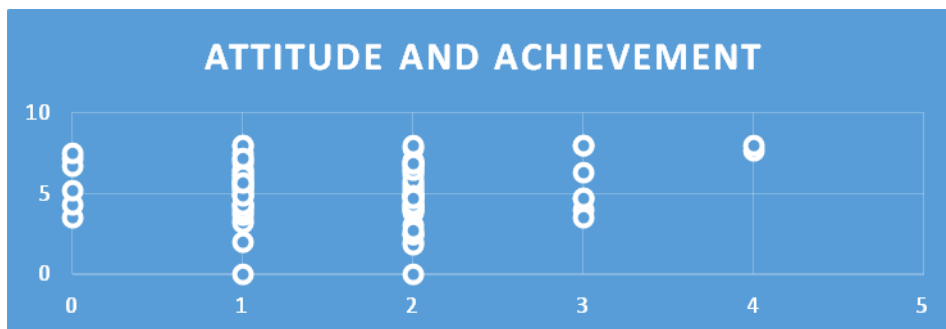
#### 6. Findings



**Figure 01.** Semantic space illustrating attitudes to various series on German language acquisition

Figure 01 illustrates attitudes to German as a foreign language through the individual series. In semantic space these series move in the dimensions of strength and assessment. Pupils perceive a German teacher positively, regarding him as good and strong. The German teacher appears as a central variable in

the foreign language acquisition process. Regarding the strength and assessment dimensions, the teacher variable proved to be one of the strongest factors in creating positive attitudes towards German language acquisition. A paradoxical finding is that even though a teacher represents the central variable in German language acquisition, his lessons are not in the strength dimension compared to an ideal German language lesson.



**Figure 02.** Relationship between pupil attitude to German language acquisition and their achievement

Figure 02 portrays respondent attitudes in relation to German language acquisition in respect of their grades. Axis X shows grades (1-4) and axis Y attitudes. The lower the number on axis Y, the more positive the respondents' attitudes. The place where the points are more concentrated represents a place with a higher density of answers.

The graph shows that pupils with weaker achievement (grades 3 and 4) display a worse relationship to German language acquisition. Most pupils with average achievement (grades 1 and 2) do not show a clear relationship to German language acquisition. Most of them described their attitude to the language as average or negative, while a positive attitude was described only occasionally.

Most of the pupils with average achievement (grade 3) classed their attitude to German language acquisition as average, with some students even indicating it as negative.

## 7. Conclusion

Research showed that attitudes strongly correlate to achievement and motivation in a foreign language, meaning attitudes and overall endogenous factors affect foreign language acquisition. The perception of the semantic space in respect of German language acquisition can be deemed disputable. Findings showed that student attitudes to German language acquisition are mostly negative. Most of the series involving German language acquisition are perceived by respondents as average or negative, but there were three who were found in the semantic space in the positive quadrant.

As the pupils showed strong positive ties to the teacher in particular, we can assume that the teacher plays a dominant role in the German language acquisition process. The teacher should therefore be focused more on motivating the individual components of learning. We agree with Dorny (2014) and Riemer (2010) who try to integrate previous motivation theories (intrapsychical motivation dimension, which should reveal the quality of motivation) and the complexity of motivation. These models are mostly multidimensional, observing interaction between various internal and external motivation

dimensions. Respondents also showed positive ties to the ideal German lesson and to Germany as a country.

Respondents showed weak ties mostly to German grammar, vocabulary and music. German grammar seems abstract to students and more time is required to grasp and process it. Similar German words often represent a very complicated system for pupils, which they need to adopt and which is distinct from their mother tongue. Respondents come into contact with German music minimally, as it is distant for them and does not represent any source of entertainment or learning. These might be the reasons why these series came at the end the ranking and it might also be related to the ontogenetic perspective of pupils.

The second part of the research question showed the difference in attitudes related to grades. The higher the grade (3-5), the worse the achievement and the more negative the attitude was to the German language. Negative attitudes were found in students with a grade 4. However, students with a better achievement (grades 1 and 2) did not display a particularly positive attitude to the German language. We agree with Riermer (1997) who claims that the correlation between attitudes and achievement is not clear, as a positive attitude does not automatically ensure achievement in learning a foreign language. It therefore seems that achievement in German language acquisition is semantically bound to the teacher's personality in dependence on the assessment and strength dimensions.

In conclusion, we can categorically state that it is necessary to deal with attitudes of pupils in SLA. If students don't have positive attitudes to learning a foreign language, they need to be supported in the learning process by a teacher to whom they have a positive attitude, with this proving a dominant factor to learning. This area opens up a channel for further research, which could be centred around the teacher and his/her competence in relation to student attitudes and the teacher's need for structure and its impact on pupils' attitudes.

Moreover, we cannot assume that a positive attitude will automatically ensure achievement in learning a foreign language. This draws the question as to whether a positive attitude predicates achievement in learning the German language or if success in learning predicates a positive attitude in pupils. The interaction of attitude and attained success certainly merits further investigation.

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