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**LEARNING MORE FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

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*Abstract*

The purpose of the paper is to present the current and still preliminary results of the analysis of the opinions expressed by students learning more foreign languages. This analysis is based on findings made within the framework of one of the research projects which is being realized at the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). In the present multi-cultural world, human beings are exposed to quite a big number of various languages, which can make the process of communication rather difficult. That is why one of the projects supported by the Faculty of Education of the above given university focuses on learners of more foreign languages. One of its research questions is: Are students of more foreign languages aware of the language interference and / or potentials of the positive transfer? Four students majoring in teaching foreign languages have been encouraged to participate in carrying out the research. Not only their research activities but also their feelings about the research are presented in the text. The research is being carried out at present. The so far available findings and results show that learners of more foreign languages are not sufficiently aware of potentials of the positive transfer. Since it is important to make learners and teachers of foreign languages aware of experts' opinions on language interference and positive language transfer, the paper includes references to these opinions.

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## 1. Introduction

The terms of globalization and multi-culturalism have become the key words characterizing the present world and life of people. The term “culture” included in the word “multi-culturalism” generally refers to everything which is acquired by the members of a particular community. Since the essential component of any culture is definitely its language, the above mentioned term of “multi-culturalism” goes hand in hand with the term of “multi-lingualism”.

Living and communicating in any kind of multi-cultural environment, human beings logically get a lot of multi-lingual inputs. Some expressions and phrases coming from foreign languages then appear in their communication realized in their mother tongue. These expressions of foreign languages have been quite often acquired by the speakers without any planned intentions, they are then used in non-systematic ways. But without being systematic, the process of communication cannot be successful. That is why the present educational policy of the multi-lingual European Union requires pupils and students of European schools to learn at least one foreign language as an obligatory school subject. Ten years ago, Stockwell said: “the ability to speak more than one language is more common in the world than monolingualism” (Stockwell, 2007, p. 11). Nowadays, people in their productive age are more or less required to speak at least one foreign language, foreign language skills have become a kind of demanded economic commodity. The issue of globalization is linked with efforts to make the process of learning and teaching foreign languages more successful.

### 1.1. Learning more foreign languages

The process of learning more foreign languages is extremely demanding. As Crystal (2007, p. 430) says: “A few gifted language learners do exist, but most people arrive at their fluency only as a result of hard work, expended over a considerable period of time.”

However, language learning skills belong to those kinds of skills which are transferrable. Moreover, when learners are well trained and conveniently instructed by their teachers, they can become autonomous learners who are able to become aware of the phenomena which make their learning process easier. The well trained learners can also find the ways how to profit from the already acquired language skills and abilities, and how to eliminate the factors which have negative impacts on performances in foreign languages.

A sufficient level of linguistic competence can definitely make the learning process easier: “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.” (Arndt, Harvey & Nutall, 2000, p. 11).

The history of all the learning process is also quite important. As Harmer (1994, p. 4) says: “Another factor affecting the attitude of students is their previous experiences as language learners. If they were successful, then they may be pre-disposed to success now. Failure then may mean that they expect failure now.”

## **1.2. Project of specific research**

In 2016 a two-year project of so called specific research was started at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). It focuses mainly on the impacts of the already acquired knowledge of foreign language/s on the process of learning another language / other languages later. The project is called “The impact of English on other foreign languages studied”. The spheres in the centre of interest are language interference, potentially positive transfers and foreign language learners’ awareness of and opinions on these two phenomena. The main objectives of the project are to find out how much influenced university students are by English (their first foreign language studied) in the process of studying other foreign languages and how they themselves perceive the process of their learning more foreign languages. These findings will be then used for making the process of teaching foreign languages improved. Through participating in this project, all the respondents are being trained in making self-reflections and in becoming self-aware of the learning process, which will make their life-long process of learning foreign languages more effective.

The Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove encourages its students to apply their research abilities as soon as possible. The students can become, together with their teachers, members of various research teams involved in specific projects. Then the students’ research abilities and skills are developed, the researching students can learn how to practically apply their theoretical knowledge. The involvement of students into research projects is linked with one of the educational aims which should be essential for all universities and which is mentioned by Penny Ur, who calls for educating and supporting of “autonomous and creative professionals, with responsibility for their wider development of professional theory and practice” (Ur, 2009, p. 8).

Four students enrolled in Master Degree’s studies majoring in teaching foreign languages are involved in the above mentioned specific research as members of the research team. Three of them are under-graduate students of German and English, one student majors in English, French and Czech (this selection is quite intentional – the perspective of both the mother tongue and two foreign languages will be applied). These students are currently in a kind of a “double position” - they are studying foreign languages and, simultaneously, they have already started their teaching career. This learner – teacher’s “double position” will hopefully bring a broader perspective to the research realized.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Students learning more foreign languages make some kinds of mistakes which seem to result from the language interference. This issue has been discussed and researched into by a number of linguists and methodologists of foreign language teaching. Various kinds of contrastive analyses are carried out because, as Crystal (2007, p. 431) says: “The systematic comparisons of L1 and L2, in order to predict areas of greatest learning difficulty – a procedure known as contrastive analysis – explains only a small part of what goes on in foreign language learning.”

It is a long process for the learners to build their knowledge of any language studied. Certain kinds of stages gradually appear in this learning process, which can be illustrated by the following statement made by Crystal (2007, p. 431): “Language learning, in this account, proceeds in a series of transitional

stages, as learners acquire more knowledge of the L2. At each stage, they are in control of a language system that is equivalent to neither the L1 nor the L2 – an interlanguage.”

The term of interlanguage refers to a kind of the linguistic system, which is different from both the learner’s mother tongue and the target language being studied, but which is evidently linked with both these languages. During the learning process, the interlanguage gradually stops developing and starts to disappear. Interlanguage is more evident with adult learners of foreign languages because five psycholinguistic processes hypothesized by Selinker can appear and can shape this linguistic system when adults learn another language: (a) native language transfer, (b) overgeneralization of target language rules, (c) transfer of training, (d) strategies of communication, and (e) strategies of learning.

It is obvious that errors are likely to appear in the target language when it is being learnt. Crystal sees producing of these errors positively because “Errors are likely to emerge when learners make the wrong deductions about the nature of the L2. ... These errors provide positive evidence about the nature of the learning process, as the learner gradually works out what the foreign language system is.” (Crystal, 2007, p. 432)

Talking about language systems, it can be interesting for learners to reveal which qualities are shared by different language systems. As it is said by Radford et al. (2009, p. 6): “Suppose grammars are produced for a variety of languages by specifying the components introduced above. Naturally, we would expect these grammars to exhibit certain differences, but we might also discover that they have some properties in common. If these properties appear in grammars for a wide range of languages, standard scientific practice leads us to hypothesize that they are common to the grammars of all natural languages.”

At this point we are coming to another important key word of this paper – the term of positive transfer. The word “transfer” is used by Selinker (see above) in connection with the native language and training. But the positive transfer is linked also with strategies of learning. If learners know which kinds of training and which learning strategies were convenient for them in the course of previous processes of language learning, they can apply them and they can make the new learning process more effective and more successful. This opinion can be supported by Crystal (2007, p. 432): “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 foreign language learning.” (Crystal, D., 2007, p. 432)

### **3. Research Questions**

|The basic research question linked with this paper was: Are students of more foreign languages aware of the language interference and/or potentials of the positive transfer? To find answers to this basic research question and to make students self-reflecting, a questionnaire was created by the four above mentioned students involved in the research team.|

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

|The main purpose of the paper is to present the current results of the analysis of the opinions expressed by students learning more foreign languages. The awareness of students’ opinions on the

language interference and language transfer could improve the teaching process. This statement can be supported by Tauchmanova (2016): “Foreign language teachers should be able to anticipate difficulties resulting from the negative impacts, they should be also able to use potentials of positive transfers. Then a more effective teaching – learning process can be expected.”

The results of the teaching process obviously depend also on the learners, their involvement in and commitment to the learning process. We can agree with the following opinion expressed by Crystal (2007, p. 431): “The active role of the learner is an established principle. It is recognized that there are important individual differences among learners, especially in personality and motivation, that can directly influence the teaching outcome. Research is therefore now directed not only at the way teachers teach, but also at the way learners learn.”

In connection with the issues discussed above it is clear that under-graduate students majoring in foreign language teaching need to be encouraged to start with their own research activities. Training in carrying out various kinds of research should not be neglected in curricula and syllabi of courses offered and held by institutions educating pre-service and also in-service teachers. We can agree with Parrot, who encourages teachers to research the effectiveness of teaching, to realize activities which help them “to evaluate the effect their teaching has on their learners’ awareness, understanding and speaking or writing” (Parrot, 2015, p. 457). That is why another purpose of this study is to present the activities of the four students, i.e. the four pre-service teachers involved in the research team. |

## **5. Research Methods**

|Two basic research methods are applied in our project – those of quantitative and qualitative research. The method of an opinion poll questionnaire is being applied as the main research method. That means that a bigger focus is on the qualitative analysis of the responses to the questions presented in a questionnaire distributed to learners of more foreign languages. Three types of questions were included in the questionnaire (open questions, multiple-choice questions, multiple-choice questions with a possibility to add an additional comment and/or answer not listed). The research findings and related comments on them are presented with references to already existing theoretical and practical findings. |

## **6. Findings**

|As it was mentioned above, the research and its analyses are still being carried out. Our presentation of the findings will be thus limited to two selected issues of the research. The first one is the issue of the questionnaire on the basis of which the quantitative and qualitative analyses are being carried out and which was created by the four under-graduate students who are involved in the research as members of the research team. The second issue presented are the findings about two study groups of elderly students attending courses in English which are run by so called University of the Third Age. The research into this specific age group of students and its analysis are more or less finished, therefore a preliminary summary of the findings can be presented.

### **6.1. Questionnaire created by under-graduate students majoring in teaching foreign languages**

As it was mentioned above, the task given to the students majoring in teaching English and another foreign language was to create a universal anonymous questionnaire focusing on the respondents' self-reflections on their experience with and awareness of the process of learning foreign languages. The questionnaire was supposed to be distributed to the following groups of students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove: (a) students majoring in teaching foreign languages, (b) students majoring in philology, (c) students majoring in other subjects than foreign languages, (d) students of the University of the Third Age who are enrolled in courses in English, (e) in-service teachers who are studying for improving their qualifications as English teachers.

The types of questions included in the questionnaire were already mentioned in connection with the research methods used. The main interest of this sub-chapter is to reveal which sub-groups of questions were designed by the researchers. The student – learner “double position” of the designers of the questionnaire has been already mentioned. Applying their theoretical knowledge and reflecting their own experience of being both a learner and a teacher, the authors of the questionnaire decided to use the following sub-groups of questions:

- (a) the respondent's age and sex, his / her list of the languages ever studied
- (b) questions concerning the age issues and the length of the learning process (the age of starting with learning the first and other foreign languages, the choice of the order of the languages being studied, the feelings about the right age for starting the learning process, etc.)
- (c) relations of the respondents to individual foreign languages and the causes of these relations (the favourite language, the most important language, reasons for starting with learning particular languages, etc.)
- (d) the respondents' evaluation of their own knowledge and skills of individual foreign languages and the causes of success / failure in learning them
- (e) the respondents' evaluation of the teaching process (favourite / disliked ways of teaching; favourite / disliked methods of teaching; teaching / learning activities; the teachers' personalities and their approach to teaching and to the learners)
- (f) language interference (types and frequency of mistakes caused by the impact of other foreign languages)
- (g) positive transfer (giving examples of fruitful applications of the already acquired language skills)

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the answers have not been finished yet. However, the designers of the questionnaire are already rather disappointed. There are two main causes of this disappointment. The first one results from a rather ignorant approach of the respondents. Relatively a lot out of the total number of 250 respondents did not make proper self-reflections when answering the open questions. For example, the question “Which foreign language were you taught in the best way, and why do you consider that way to be the best?” was frequently not actually answered (there were answers like “I do not know.”, “It is difficult to say.”, “I actually do not remember.”). The second kind of disappointment comes from the questionnaire itself. The designers are now not very happy about

structuring and formulating of some questions. They themselves admit that some “ignoring” answers can result from incomplete understanding of the questions. Some kinds of follow-up semi-structured interviews would be welcomed.

A positive factor about the researching students’ disappointment is that they are able of self-reflections and self-assessment, thanks to which they can improve their future research activities.

## **6.2. Elderly learners of more foreign languages**

Different kinds of courses are offered to seniors by so called Universities of the Third Age which have been established also in the Czech Republic. Courses in foreign languages run by the University of the Third Age which is guaranteed by the University of Hradec Kralove belong to the most popular and most demanded ones.

As it was mentioned above, the objective of the project is to find out how university students themselves perceive their own learning of more foreign languages. Since all the attendants of the foreign language courses run by the University of the Third Age have learnt at least three foreign languages in their life, they have also been made involved in the research. The questionnaire was distributed to forty senior respondents in total. Twenty out of these forty respondents were, in the academic year 2016/17, attending the courses in English offered to beginners, the other twenty students were attending the classes offered to upper-intermediate students of English. This research sample is not balanced from the gender point of view – only 2 respondents are males, 38 respondents are females. This misbalance, however, reflects the reality – most of the senior attendants of the courses in foreign languages are women. The respondents’ average age was 69.6 (the age range was from 63 to 79). It is important to mention that the first foreign language learnt by all the respondents was Russian, and as it has been already mentioned, all the respondents had learnt at least two foreign languages before started their foreign language studies at the University of the Third Age. Quite interesting is the fact that all of our respondents learnt German as their second language. Latin, English, French, Italian and Spanish appeared on the list as the third foreign language. French was given as the fourth foreign language in case of two respondents, one respondent learnt Spanish as the fourth foreign language.

It is obvious that such vast experience with learning foreign languages is linked with quite a high level of the linguistic competence of these senior students. We were really wondering whether these learners are aware of their pre-dispositions to use the potential of the positive transfer, and whether they are able to transfer their already acquired language skills and learning strategies into the process of learning other foreign languages. There were 8 negative reactions to the open question “In which sphere/s of learning English (i.e. the spheres of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, reading, writing, speaking) are your skills and experience gained during your earlier language studies helpful?” It seems important to mention that all the eight negative responses were given by the respondents from the group of beginners, and they were formulated in the following sense: “Certain knowledge of other languages makes my learning process more difficult.” “I am not able to profit from my previous studies. I think that they make me even more confused.” We were quite pleased, however, that our research can really result in a growing self-awareness of the respondents - one woman (again from the beginners’ group) answered the above given question in the following neutral way: “This question is quite interesting. I have never

thought about this issue. But I will start doing that.” The other 31 reactions were positive; in all the cases the sphere of vocabulary was chosen as that one in which the previously gained knowledge can be used. Here are two illustrative examples of these positive answers: “I think that I can learn some words more easily because of knowing German and French.” “I can guess the meaning of some words which sound similar in German.”).

Unfortunately, elderly learners are not sufficiently trained in making the most of their high linguistic competence but they are rather frustrated about language interference. A majority of the respondents chose the answer “often” or “very often” when answering the question “If you speak your second / third language, do you recall in your mind expressions or phrases existing in your first foreign language studied?”

Better reactions of the respondents were expected, for example, to the following open question asking for comparisons: “Which language were you, in your opinion, taught in the best way? Give the reasons for your answer.” Surprisingly, there was absolutely no answer in 8 cases, in 5 cases a language was / languages were mentioned without any reasoning. The comparisons were quite varied and interesting. These are some examples of the answers: “English – the basic grammar is easier; it is accessible at the Internet.” “English – at the time being, I am quite happy with my present teacher.” “English – grammar is practiced in a good way.” “German – a pro-active way of teaching, exchange stays.” “Russian – our teachers were good; their ways of teaching were interesting; I achieved excellent results in the secondary school leaving examination.” “English – after the political changes I got very interested in this language.” “English – I mean my previous private lessons of English with a lot of conversation.” “Italian – I live in Italy; I was exposed to the language.” “German – journeys to Germany, but the way of teaching was really tough.” “Russian – books, films, exchanging of letters; there were no other possibilities.” “German – I attended an intensive course.” “English – I have more time, it is learning for pleasure, I am happy when I can find that I have learnt something.” From these examples it is clear that not all of the answers actually referred to the way of teaching and some answers were rather inappropriate. At this point we can refer back to the issues mentioned in connection with the questionnaire.

When recalling positive aspects of previous studies of foreign languages, three respondents mentioned singing of German songs. Positive aspects of using music are mentioned also in literature – there is a close relation between music and language structures in lyrics of songs. Moreover, according to Badstübner-Kizik (2014), involvement of music supports development of a subjective creativity. Using of music in foreign language classes is recommended also by Besedova (2016): “Music can be widely used in foreign language teaching because music and language share certain features. The most important one is that both of them are distinctive means of communication which use listening materials and simultaneously try to analyse and reproduce them.”

Our research has revealed that elderly students tend to compare their previous achievements in studying foreign languages with their present experience and that they need to be trained in using of potentials of positive transfers.



## 7. Conclusion

It can be claimed that knowledge and skills acquired by studying the first foreign language are evidently transferred into the process of studying other foreign languages. Students learning more foreign languages should be trained to become more aware of the issues of the language interference and especially of the positive language transfer because this awareness can make their learning process more successful. This requirement of more intensive training in the sphere mentioned is in accordance with Crystal's opinion (Crystal, 2007, p. 430): "There is a great deal of educational failure and lack of achievement in the language-learning field, which requires explanation. ... It is therefore important to study the factors that govern success or failure in this field."

A similar conclusion concerning these positive and negative factors, this time applied to foreign language teachers' work, has been made by Ondrakova and her team who are doing research into the issue of errors made in the process of foreign language learning and teaching: "Teachers have to be able to present explanations to their pupils – the pupils have to be made aware of causes of errors and also of ways how to prevent making them." (Ondrakova, 2016)

The findings presented in this paper and the findings resulting from the analyses which are being carried out at present time will be used for making the teaching process improved. Although the research and the analysis of its results have not been finished yet, preliminary conclusions can be made. The so far available data and findings show that learners of more foreign languages are not fully aware of potentials of the positive transfer and of potentials of using and applying the already built language competences.

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