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LEARNING AND TEACHING MORE FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The purpose of the presented paper is to share our team's opinions and findings made during our research into the issue of learning and teaching the second (or third) foreign language. English is currently in the position of the foreign language No. 1 in the Czech Republic, Czech school-children start learning this language at elementary school or even earlier. It can be obviously expected that during the process of learning further foreign languages, not only Czech, the mother tongue, but also English, the first foreign language, are reflected in performances given in other foreign languages. This impact occurs in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar forms and syntactic structures. One issue which is focused on in the presented text is that of errors made by learners of the German language due to their previously acquired knowledge of their first foreign language. The other issue is the importance of pre-service foreign language teachers' awareness of the phenomenon of language interference in their own process of learning further foreign languages and in their beginning teaching practice. The results of quantitative and qualitative research carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic) are presented. Undergraduate teachers of English and German were involved in the research activities. Findings made during the research will be prospectively used by them, which can make their learning process improved and their future teaching practice successful.

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1. Introduction

The present European territory is being socially and economically unified. However, there are more than fifty native languages used in Europe, and European nations do not want to lose their identity, which is expressed mainly through keeping and further developing of their mother tongue. Mutual communication among nations is essential, and although English is the language of the official communication in a vast majority of spheres, knowledge of and successful communication in at least three languages is clearly claimed in and required by official documents issued by the European Union's educational authorities. This necessity to learn more foreign languages is connected with efforts to find effective ways of teaching them and thus with efforts to find effective ways of educating foreign language teachers.

In the Czech Republic, teachers of English seem to be in an "easier" position in comparison with teachers of other foreign languages since English is currently the first foreign language taught at Czech schools. Teachers of German as the second foreign language are then in a more difficult position because a relatively big number of their pupils or students consider their (sometimes just elementary) knowledge of one foreign language (English) as absolutely sufficient for their international communication, and they consider learning of the more complicated system of German inflection as wasting of time. The ability of seeking new sources of inspiration for making the process of learning foreign languages easier and more motivating seems thus even more important for teachers of other languages than for English teachers. Heinrichova, for example, sees a potential improvement of the situation in a wider use of fiction in German classes, and careful choice of methods, as she claims (Heinrichova, 2017, p. 185): "It is important for a teacher to acquire methods based on students' own work. These techniques emphasise students' own thinking and problem solving." Besedova focuses on applying music in foreign language classes and says (Besedova, Štočková, & Šeslerová, 2017, p. 77): "If music is made purposefully involved in the teaching process, then it plays both the informative and formative role. Music can motivate and activate pupils. Simultaneously, it provides learners with effective practice of spoken language – pronunciation, rhythm, intonation and language fluency can be effectively practised."

Within the framework of the European Union's educational policy, there are numerous projects focused on the research in the sphere of foreign languages. One of them was a two-year project of specific research which was being carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic) in the period of 2016 – 2017 and which was closely connected with the topic of this paper.

1.1. Project of specific research into learning and teaching more foreign languages

This project was coordinated by Jana Ondrakova (the Head of the Department of German Language and Literature) and Vera Tauchmanova (a member of the academic staff of the Department of English Language and Literature). Its key focus was on the impact of the already existing knowledge of and skills in English (the first foreign language taught at Czech schools) on the process of learning further foreign languages (with a specific focus on German). Three university students majoring in teaching English and German were involved in our research. Their involvement in the research activities was in accordance with the Faculty of Education's policy – if students are provided with a chance to be members of research teams

together with their teachers, then their research skills and following practical applications of these skills are developed, and they can thus meet Ur's demand for "autonomous and creative professionals, with responsibility for their wider development of professional theory and practice" (Ur, 2009, p. 8). Another of Ur's opinions can be also applied when talking about students' involvement in research activities through which they learn about various aspects of foreign language learning (Ur, 2009, p. 8): "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."

The research period planned for the project finished last year, but the research results can be further analyzed, drawn upon, and implemented in teaching practice. Some of the results and finding made are presented in the following text.

2.   Problem Statement

The sphere of teaching foreign languages has a long tradition in the Czech Republic, which is also connected with the fact that, depending on the social and political development, teachers involved in this sphere have had to face various problematic issues. One of the current issues which definitely cannot be ignored by foreign language teachers is that of their learners' transferring mistakes from other foreign languages which were being learnt by them before. The awareness of this issue is important for both learners and teachers.

2.1. Learning more foreign languages

According to Yamak (2008, p. 21), language learning is a conscious process, commonly associated with formal classroom instruction, that relies on the direct study of grammar and error correction. It is a long-term (or even life-long) process for every learner to build his/her knowledge of any language studied. This learning process develops in gradually occurring stages, 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 not the L2 – an interlanguage." Ligthbrown and Spada refer to Selinker and his understanding of the term of "interlanguage". This term is connected with learners' developing second language knowledge. "Analysis of a learner's interlanguage shows that it has some characteristics of the learner's native language, some characteristics of the second language, and some characteristics which seem to be very general and tend to occur in all or most language systems. Interlanguages are systematic, but they are also dynamic, continually evolving as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about the second language" (Ligthbrown & Spada, 1996, p. 55)

All persons learning more foreign languages unavoidably make some kinds of errors resulting from the language interference. This issue has been focused on for quite a long time by numerous linguists and methodologists of foreign language teaching, numerous kinds of contrastive analyses have been carried out. 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." Talking about language interference, the findings made by Swan and Smith (2001, p. 11) are of a high importance: "Since transfer mistakes arise where the systems of two languages are similar but not identical, they are most common (at least as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned) in the interlanguage of students who speak languages closely related to the target language."

As it was mentioned above, some kinds of specific mistakes occur in foreign language performances made by speakers who learn more foreign languages. Bickes (1995) carried out research in errors caused by interference between the mother tongue and foreign languages studied, and he claimed that such a kind of errors in pronunciation, as well as such a kind of lexical and grammar errors can damage communication or can even result in a complete misunderstanding.

2.2. Teaching more foreign languages

Learning foreign languages is definitely closely connected with and strongly affected by the applied teaching methods and approaches. Lightbrown and Spada (1996) consider teachers' creativity as a factor highly important for the learning process. In the context of this paper their opinions are worth mentioning (p. 105): "… second language teachers can (and should) provide guided, form-based instruction and correction in specific circumstances… 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."

Generally speaking, working with learners' errors is quite an essential phenomenon unavoidably connected with teachers' work. This issue is focused on by Ondrakova (2017), who claims that the ability to find, correct and explain mistakes is quite essential for foreign language teachers. This sphere is still rather neglected in training of pre- and also in-service teachers. However, if foreign language teachers are better educated in available ways of positive using their learners' errors, their teaching will be more successful and their learners will better understand their own learning process.

Our research in teaching more foreign languages was also deeply influenced by Janikova's opinion (2011, pp. 136–137): "Until recently, different foreign languages were taught separately. The ways of teaching the first foreign language were not different from those applied when the second or further foreign languages were taught. The teaching materials offered very few or no stimuli for making the use of the knowledge and experience gained by the learners in the process of learning the first foreign language. Moreover, foreign language teachers had not been trained for such interconnections." There is no doubt about the fact that the process of learning the second and further foreign languages is impacted by the learners' previous experience and previously acquired language abilities and skills. Foreign language teachers should be aware of this fact and they should not ignore it when creating a learning environment demanded by Yamak (2008, p. 21): "In practice teachers should create a dynamic environment that is full of meaningful input. … With relevant and interesting tasks, students will be motivated to use a large amount of natural language, paving the way for the acquisition process. …. This type of teaching requires knowing about students' needs and interests and applying that knowledge to activities and tasks. This leads students

to realize that learning has a purpose, and learning with a purpose is bound to be exciting." There can be no doubt about the fact that with applying knowledge of more languages, we can create even a more dynamic learning environment with a more meaningful input.

3. Research Questions

There were two essential research questions to be answered in this paper. The first one was: "Can we confirm the existence of language interference and find examples of a negative transfer from English resulting in errors made in German tests taken by Czech native speakers whose first foreign language was English?" The second key question to be answered was closely connected with the first one and was addressed to pre-service teachers of English and German: "Having in mind your learning and teaching more foreign languages, can you make a kind of self-reflection connected with your errors made in German due to a negative transfer from English?"

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to present the findings resulting from our research into the impact of English on learning and teaching other foreign languages. We hope that these findings will help foreign language teachers to better understand the process of learning foreign languages. The necessity of communicating in more foreign languages has been already mentioned. According to Tauchmanova (2016, p. 564), "it can be logically assumed that in case of learning more languages, a bigger number of wrong and inapplicable transfers of the already acquired language habits into the production of other languages will be made by learners." However, the number of interference errors does not rise proportionally with the rising number of the foreign languages studied. Moreover, if foreign language teachers are aware of the issue of language interference, they can be expected to implement such teaching methods which will help their learners to better understand their learning process and then to decrease the number of errors caused by a negative transfer from other languages.

5. Research Methods

There are two basic research methods applied by our team – that of quantitative research and that of qualitative research. The quantitative research focused on the analysis of errors obviously made due to the language interference resulting from the mother tongue knowledge and the knowledge of the first foreign language. University entrance tests in German were analysed, these written tests were taken in three consecutive years (2016, 2017, 2018) by prospective university students majoring in German studies. Our qualitative research focused on self-reflections made by three pre-service teachers of German and English as foreign languages. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these students participating in the research, their personal experience and opinions connected with the issue of interference were important for us.

6. Findings

Our findings are presented in two sub-sections. The first one deals with the aforementioned statistical analysis of errors in German resulting from the respondents' knowledge of English (their first, resp. earlier foreign language). The second sub-chapter presents findings made during the semi-structured interviews with pre-service (undergraduate) teachers of German and English.

6.1. Analysis of errors made due to the impact of knowledge of English on performances in German

The first phase of our research into the impact of English on the second (or the third) foreign language started in 2016. The interference was analysed in two consecutive years, written tests in German taken by applicants for studying the German language at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove were our research sample. Our analysis was focused on the grammar translation part of the entrance tests, in which the level of the applicants' productive language skills based on their language competence can be revealed in the most evident way. Errors resulting from a "double" interference, that means the negative transfer from both the mother tongue (unavoidable in the process of learning any foreign language) and the first foreign language studied really occurred in the analysed tests – our assumption of an existing impact of the knowledge of English on performances given in the German language was proved to be correct both in 2016 (a sample of 48 respondents) and in 2017 (50 respondents). In 2016, there were 27 respondents (which means 56.25 % of the total number of the tested applicants) who made at least one mistake due to the English interference. In 2017, at least one mistake resulting from that interference was made by 30 respondents (that means 60 % of the total number).

Table 1 presents examples of errors which appeared in the entrance tests in German taken in the aforementioned first two years of our research. The table lists four types of errors (orthographic, lexical, morphological and syntactic) which are assumed to be caused by English interference. The correct German versions are given in the brackets. If the specified error occurred more than once, then that multiple occurrence is indicated with the particular digit.

Table 01. Examples of errors occurring in tests in German in 2016 and 2017

Orthographic errors	Lexical errors	Morphological errors	Syntactic errors
thiese (diese)	*listered (Hört zu!)*	*Mariana´s (Marianas) 2x*	*Wir können dort nicht gehen ohne dich. (Wir können ohne dich nicht hingehen.)*
House (Haus) 5x	*schauen (zeigen) 4x*	*in kultur interesierd / interesand (sich interessieren für die Kultur) – 3x*	*Um halb elf wir begginen test schreiben. (Um halb elf beginnen wir Test zu schreiben.)*
shön (schön) 3x	*geshawt (gezeigt)*	*am half von elf (um halb elf)*	*Man hier laut nicht muss sprechen. (Man darf hier nicht laut sprechen.)*

son (Sohn) 5x	*behaind (hinter)*	*man lern Deutsch (man lernt Deutsch)*	
sonn (Sohn) 2x	*uncle (Onkel)*	*das Heft is (das Heft ist)*	
Theatre/Theather (Theater) 11x	*Job (Arbeit)*	*wir start (wir beginnen)*	
Author (Autor) 6x	*sat (traurig)*		
Kulture/kultur (Kultur) 4x	*pass (ablegen) 2x*		
sexte Buch (das sechste)	*gejoggen (gelaufen) – 2x*		
Tish (Tisch)	*where (wo) 3x*		
Apothek (Apotheke)	*when (wenn) 2x*		
test (Test)	*wenn (wann) 5x*		
	nähste (neben)		
	Newspaper (Zeitung)		
	Presse (Zeitung)		
	half (halb) 2x		
	wir turnen (wir biegen ab) 3x		
	often (oft) 7x		
	book (Buch)		
	start (beginnen)		
	Körner (die Ecke)		
	Faul/Faule (Fehler)		
	die Mappe (die Karte)		
	der Mag des Tees (eine Tasse Tee)		

At this point it is important to refer back to the term of "double interference" and to mention the fact that the examples of wrong syntactic structures are not necessarily connected with the negative transfer from merely English and that they are at least partly connected with the negative transfer from the mother tongue. (In the semi-structured interview which is discussed later in the text this awareness was clearly declared by one of the respondents: "In my opinion, this kind of errors result more probably from the word order used in the Czech language.") Moreover, during the interviews, the undergraduate teachers of English and German drew attention to a kind of "triple interference" – some German syntactic rules are then wrongly applied in English structures produced by Czech native speakers studying German. (For example, lexical verbs' infinitive forms used after modal verbs are placed at the very end of sentences.) We consider the fact that these mistakes are listed by Swan & Smith (2001, pp. 40 – 49) as mistakes frequently made by German native speakers learning English as being highly important.

The second research phase focused on comparing the above mentioned analysis results with this year's analysis of errors caused by the same language interference. In total, 65 respondents' tests were analysed; 34 respondents, which means 52.3%, made mistakes caused by a negative transfer from German. The percentage is lower in comparison with the two previous years but the identified errors are more essential.

There were more numerous cases of German nouns spelled with a non-capital beginning letter and of the missing inflection of attributive adjectives, there were more numerous incorrect prepositions and syntactic structures with an incorrect word order. A kind of "interesting" errors occurred in word formation – German derivation morphemes were added to English expressions. The biggest number of errors occurred in orthography (32 in total), the second most problematic was the lexical sphere (18 errors). 11 morphological errors were identified; syntactic errors seemed to be the least frequent (but it is important to stress the fact the respondents were not supposed to use any of more complicated syntactic structures).

Table 2 presents the errors in a more specific way:

Table 02. Examples of errors occurring in tests in German in 2018

Orthographic errors	Lexical errors	Morphological errors	Syntactic errors
Nouns starting with a non-capital letter 7x	*Magazine (Zeitung) 2x*	*gröss Park (der große Park)*	*ich werde sagen es dir (ich werde es dir sagen)*
Bröt (Brot) 6 x	*Karpet (Teppich)*	*gut Stadtplan (ein guter Stadtplan)*	*mein Freund heute trinkt (mein Freund trinkt heute)*
eine Viertel Stunde (eine Viertelstunde) 10x	*Kinderroom (Kinderzimmer)*	*der Arbeit (die Arbeit)*	*obwohl er lernt schon lange (obwohl er schon lange lernt)*
dann geht Ihr (dann geht ihr)	*der Schreiber/Schriftler/Schrifter (Schriftsteller)*	*alt Tisch (ein alter Tisch)*	*das Heft, das liegt hier auf der Bank (das Heft, das hier auf der Bank liegt)*
junger (jünger) 4 x	*these park (dieser Park)*	*gross Bücherregal (das große Bücherregal)*	*Wessen das Heft ist? (Wessen Heft ist das?)*
dain (dein)	*ihr lasstet die Arbeit (ihr beendet die Arbeit)*	*in Winter (im Winter)*	*Hier du kannst nicht sprechen. / Hier man darf nicht sprechen. (Hier darf man nicht sprechen.)*
gröss (groß)	*Medikhaus (Apotheke)*		
gutte plane (gute Pläne)	*auf der Desk (auf der Bank)*		
Tea (Tee)	*unser Uncle (unser Onkel)*		
Author (Autor)	*mugt tee (Tasse Tee)*		
	Sitzapparatur (Sitzgarnitur)		
	laud (laut)		

6.2. Semi-structured interviews with pre-service teachers of English and German

In connection with the aforementioned second key research question, a kind of qualitative research was carried out. The method of semi-structured interviews was chosen and applied; it is important to mention the fact that the qualitative research applying this method was carried out before the results of the entrance tests' analysis presented in 6.1 subchapter were known. For the purpose of smoothly going interviews, the second key research question was subdivided into three "sub-questions":

1) Can you give examples of your own mistakes which you have made in your performances in German due to the impact of your earlier learning of English?

2) Can you give any examples of situations when your personal experience with learning more foreign languages helped you in your beginning teaching practice?

3) Can you propose any strategies applicable in the process of teaching German in which a negative or positive transfer from learning English will be used?

These questions were answered by three students majoring in teaching English and German at lower secondary schools. For the purpose of this study we will present the answers given by just one female student. The main reason for choosing her answers was the fact that she has experienced learning more foreign languages. (Her first foreign language was English; the second foreign language was German. The student has also experienced learning Spanish, French and Russian.) Her answers are presented in a shortened version (the full version can be found in Tauchmanova et al., 2017, pp. 50-61):

1) "The biggest problems are with vocabulary since there are a lot of German expressions similar to English ones. Sometimes I use an English word in my German performances without realizing that, for example the word ´end´ instead of ´Ende´ and the word ´hello´ instead of ´hallo´. I am even able to add German morphemes to English expressions. Once I mixed the English word ´anger´ with its German equivalent ´der Ärger´ and then I used the resulting version ´der Anger´ even in a test in German morphology! Sometimes I use English expressions or the whole structures in my German texts. I can remember one of my presentations focused on German literature in which I use the phrase ´for example´ instead of ´zum Beispiel´. I did not realize my error until the rest of the class started laughing. I can also give one example of a pronunciation error: I have created a funny mixture of the English-German pronunciation and pronounced the expression ´die Syllable´ as ´[zɪləbl]´. My orthographic mistakes in German are quite frequent, especially in expressions similar to English ones: ´English´, Tschechish´, ´Fish´, ´Pedagogik´, ´Prise´, ´Music´. Sometimes I am really not sure when deciding which variety is English and which is German. The German word order required in subordinate clauses is my nightmare, but, in this case, my mistakes are more probably caused by the transfer from Czech."

2) "I do not think that my experience with learning more foreign languages is somehow helpful in my own teaching practice. However, I have found out that my learners can understand some German grammar issues better when I refer to similar rules which they know from their learning English."

3) "We can use a positive transfer from English when presenting structures and issues which are similar in German (Futur I, passive voice, secondary modality, gradation of adjectives, etc.). However, we must be sure that the learners really understand the given issue in English, otherwise they could get even more confused. In my opinion, it is also important to mention so called false friends and explain to our learners that the same word can have a different meaning in the other language (chef x der Chef; brief x der Brief; rock x der Rock; gift x das Gift) or that the expression with the same pronunciation is spelled differently (price x Preis, fish x Fisch, house x Haus,…)."

From the above given answers, it is clear that the results of the qualitative research confirmed the existence of common errors made in German by learners knowing English (see the tables referring to the statistical analysis). It is also important to stress the fact that the interviewed student's answers were not in contradiction with the aforementioned experts' opinions on the learning and teaching process.

7.   Conclusion

Our assumption of an existing impact of the knowledge of English on performances given in the German language has been confirmed. Our intention was to deal dominantly with negative transfers and errors caused by language interference. On the basis of the analysis of tests in German grammar which were taken by applicants for university studies of the German language in years 2016, 2017 and 2018 and on the basis of pre-service foreign language teachers' self-reflections we can claim that in the process of teaching German as the second foreign language (respectively the third or further foreign language) it is necessary to devote an increased attention to minimizing the negative impact of English and to learners' training in the correct orthography and in fixing the needed vocabulary, mainly in case of the expressions which seem equivalent or very similar, and also in correct fixing of so called false friends (falsche Freunde, faux amis). The teaching process should also focus on the issue of morphological inflection of nouns, adjectives, pronouns and verbs, and on the word order required in simple and complex sentences.

The pre-service teachers of German and English who were involved in our research were strongly aware of their own mistakes made in their performances in German due to their earlier acquired knowledge of English. This awareness of the fact that the impact of foreign languages learnt earlier is quite evident in performances given in foreign languages learnt later is connected with both their positions – the position of students of more foreign languages and that of beginning teachers of foreign languages. There is no reason not to agree with a recommendation given by one of the researching students: "From my personal experience I know how fruitful it is for learners of German and English to be aware of important differences between English and German."

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