

## Students' Attitude towards German Language Learning

Martina Sobočan<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*During their primary and secondary education, students gather experience and form attitudes toward a foreign language they are learning. This can significantly influence their success in further language education, in this case, at a higher education institution. Not only this, students in secondary and tertiary education institutions are often given the possibility to change their first foreign language, which often results in choosing English, even though they have been learning German throughout primary education, for example. While working with students in an institution of higher education, it has been noted that there is a significant number of students having a negative attitude towards German especially. The problems that arise from such an attitude are the decrease in interest and cooperation in classes, poor exam results, and finally, a resistance towards the continuation of learning the German language, even though students are aware that the language might be of great use to them in their future employment. The purpose of this paper is to identify the sources and the reasons that form such negative attitudes towards foreign languages, especially the German language. The results will hopefully help teachers of foreign languages identify the existing problems in their approach and teaching, and become aware of elements that form students' negative attitude towards foreign language and, at the same time, hopefully be useful in forming positive attitude among language learners. What is more, examples of positive experiences and practices reported by students will serve as valuable insight and motivation to teachers.*

### 1. Introduction

Foreign language learning has always been a challenge for a great number of students in all educational levels and institutions. The language class is not like classes in many other school subjects [3]. Students are confronted with a number of duties and responsibilities and must acquire language content, skills, automaticity, fluency, etc. With more complex languages, there are some firm attitudes and stereotypes that these languages are difficult to learn, whereas others are considered easy. Language teachers know that languages cannot be grouped in this manner, but still, there are some factors that language learners take into consideration when forming attitudes. Therefore, the focus of this paper is based on are the attitudes students have towards the German language compared to the ones they have to English, and it aims to discover the causes of negative attitudes towards German at the three stages of education: primary, secondary and tertiary. The findings will also shed some light on the practices and techniques that help form positive attitudes. The motivation to deal with the students' attitudes towards German arises from numerous students' reports of bad cooperation with German teachers and an overemphasis on grammar. Even in the short period of four years of work with both English and German language learners, it has been noticed that there is a far greater number of students complaining about their previous experiences with German than it was the case with English. Learners' attitudes are considered an important element in success and have been the subject of numerous research and theories. Attitudes can be both positive and negative towards the object or class of objects with which it is related [1]. Together with knowledge and skills, they influence intercultural communication [2] and naturally, attitudes, together with motivation, affect learners' success [4]. Gardner's view of this situation was of great assistance in this matter: there is evidence that teacher variables can have an effect on Attitudes toward the Learning Situation, and it is proposed that these reflect differences in techniques used by teachers to motivate their students was of great [3]. A similar research on attitudes of students enrolled at a technical university towards the German language and culture was conducted in Turkey by Şimşek et al, while in Croatia, Anja Šenjug dealt with attitudes of primary school students towards Germans, and Nikolina Vaić examined the foreign language learning motivation of second year students who have chosen to study either English or German as their first foreign language [7], [8], [9].

### 2. Methodology

The survey comprised 142 current or former students of two tertiary education institutions in the town of Čakovec: the Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec and the Faculty of Teacher Education – branch

---

<sup>1</sup> The Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec (Croatia)

Čakovec. This online questionnaire survey was anonymous and voluntary. Students of both institutions have been learning English or/and German since elementary school, some even earlier or in a different environment. The questionnaire survey consists of 42 items. The first three items collect personal data: gender, age and student status (current or former student). The rest of the questions are related to language learning, language lessons and teachers and attitudes towards language: 22 items are structured as closed-ended questions (multiple choice) and 17 as open-ended (completely unstructured) questions. Following has been tested: the difficulty of the languages for students and the reasons for this difficulty, how interesting they found the languages and why and/or why not, how strict or lenient their teachers were, their attitude towards German in past and the extent to which their attitudes changed or not together with the reasons for these attitudes, and finally, respondents were asked to provide their suggestions for German language learning and teaching improvement. The questions were based on students' and teachers' comments on and experiences with languages, language lessons and teaching in institutions of primary, secondary and tertiary education. The main focus of this paper will be the negative attitudes towards German and therefore only the results measuring the differences in the extent to which both languages were not interesting to them throughout their education will be presented, along with their list of reasons for their lack of interest for the subject, followed by their own evaluation of their attitude towards German and the possible change of the same.

### 3. Results

The sample consisted of 81.7 % female and 18.3 % male respondents. The largest proportion of the students were currently in their 1<sup>st</sup> year, and the rest range from second to fifth year, as well as senior students and 10 former students, who have already completed their studies. The respondents are almost equally distributed among the two first foreign languages they've been learning since primary school or even earlier: 50.7% learned English, and 49.3 % German. Here are some of the most significant results of the English – German comparison throughout education at primary, secondary and tertiary level, with an emphasis on attitudes towards German they expressed when evaluating the languages as interesting or uninteresting and the reasons for such opinions. Less emphasis is put on their evaluation of the difficulty of the subject and the strictness of the teacher, since this data is already provided in respondents' answers to the open-ended questions. In this respect, 27.5 % of 109 respondents decided that English wasn't interesting to them in elementary school, whereas 33.6 % of 113 respondents chose the same answer for German. The reasons for uninteresting German lessons were grammar, teachers who didn't know how to motivate students or weren't even interested in motivating them, too lenient teachers, uninteresting teaching material, memorizing word lists and a too difficult matter. Furthermore, for the extent to which both languages were uninteresting to the respondents in secondary school, the results are equal: 16.9 % of 118 responding for English and of 109 responding for German. Reasons for uninteresting German in secondary school are grammar, poor basis from elementary school, lack of good cooperation with the teacher and uninteresting and dull matter and material. And lastly, the results for the two foreign languages the respondents learn at the two institutions of tertiary education are much better. Out of 104 respondents, 5.8% regarded English as uninteresting, and out of 102 of them, only 2 % found German uninteresting. As it is evident, there is an increase in students' interest for German at this level. Nonetheless, the reasons why German is considered uninteresting by the mere 2 % must be taken into consideration as well, so grammar and uninteresting teaching material are the predominating remarks here. The respondents were also asked what their overall attitude towards German was. The results are quite encouraging: 60.8 % of 125 respondents express a positive attitude towards German, whereas only 13.6 % still have a negative attitude. The high score in the positive attitude might be related to the fact that these respondents are mature and adult people, aware of the importance of German and are now looking at language education in a significantly different way. In order to get an insight into practices that influence German language learners positively, following examples listed by respondents are worth mentioning: at elementary level, students considered their German lessons made interesting by the implementation of games, group work, workshops, media, flashcards, crosswords, charades, dialogues, songs, learning about customs in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and the teacher's positive and open approach. One of the reasons for an interesting lesson is the teacher's strictness, which validates previous answers, where respondents stated that lenient teachers didn't have a motivating effect on them; at the stage of secondary education respondents appreciated similar activities to the ones in primary school, with the addition of matter and up to date topics that were appropriate for them and they could easily identify themselves with; at tertiary level, it is evident that respondents are shifting their focus from the way the matter is presented to what is presented to them,

and thus, what is often mentioned here is the matter related to their future profession, followed by a good approach of the teacher, and again, inclusion of various teaching techniques, as it was the case with the previous two stages of education. In addition to this, students here express the need of a frequent interaction with target language community in the education process, which is a component lacking in our teaching and the solutions to this problem must be dealt with in the future.

#### 4. Conclusion

What can be read from the answers, students know to appreciate the freedom to collaborate with their peers, to discuss and to speak freely, while at the same time, they expect from the teacher to form an environment in which certain rules will exist and therefore motivate them. This brings us to Widdowson's view that the teacher surely must surely retain undiminished authority [10]. Another evident and clear factor influencing positive attitudes is visible in the respondents' answers is a need of combining various teaching techniques as a the key to success, as Hilbert Meyer amusingly puts it "*Mischwald ist besser als Monokultur*" [6], meaning that using only one technique or method, the one it was used on ourselves as learners, cannot be applicable to the teaching we conduct. He continues that it is good for a teacher to test his work and his teaching style. And, long before Meyer did, L.A.Hill proposed that we as teachers mistakenly follow certain myths when teaching: the importance of reading and learning textbook contents, memorizing lists of idioms, emphasizing the importance of full answers, free compositions and many more [5]. Times are changing, and the students' demands as well. The present times are definitely not ideal for the teacher of any subject in general. But still, as Gardner says, if the language teacher is ineffective or non-responsive, or, if the course is particularly dull or confused, etc., these factors will undoubtedly be reflected in the individual's attitudes towards the learning situation [3]. Even though the results and answers of our students in this study are positive at the very end, we mustn't forget the frustration that was evident in their answers on experience from primary school in particular. They felt that they weren't given enough and have therefore faced difficulties in all the following stages of education. This is the time where we as teachers have the chance to help students learn and love the language. We should become aware of our immense influence and be careful not to help students create negative attitudes towards German nor any other foreign language at such an early age. The number of students choosing German as their first foreign language is decreasing constantly and the negative impact of this tendency on teachers of German is already evident in Croatia's schools and universities.

#### References

- [1] Allport, G.W. "Attitudes", In: Murchison, C. (Hrsg.), Handbook of Social Psychology, Worcester, Clark University Press, 1935, 7.
- [2] Byram, M. "Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence", London, Multilingual Matters, 1997, 34.
- [3] Gardner, R.C. "Language Learning Motivation: The Student, the Teacher, and the Researcher", In: Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education, Austin, Vol.6, No.1, Fall 2001, 1 – 18.
- [4] Gardner, R.C. "The Role of Attitudes and Motivation", The Social Psychology of Language 4, London, Edward Arnold, 1985.
- [5] Hill, L.A. "Selected Articles on the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language", London, Oxford University Press, 1967, 70 – 89.
- [6] Meyer, H. "Was ist guter Unterricht?", Berlin, Cornelsen, 2004.
- [7] Şimşek, Ç.S., Selvi, A.F., Üzümlü, B. "Attitudes towards German language and culture: Reflections from Turkey", In: Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht, Darmstadt, 2007.
- [8] Šenjug, A. "Attitudes of primary school students towards Germans", In: Metodika, Journal of Theory and Application of Teaching Methodologies in Preschool, Primary, Secondary or Higher Education, Vol.9, No.17, December 2008, 310 – 317.
- [9] Vaić, N., "The role of motivation in learning foreign languages for tourism purposes", In: Foreign Languages and Tourism 2012, Conference Proceedings, Opatija, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, 2012, 213 – 222.
- [10] Widdowson, H.G., "Aspects of Language Teaching", London, Oxford University Press, 1990, 181 -195