

Opportunities in Learning a Foreign Language on the Example of a Specialist Engineering Programme

Lidija Tepeš Golubić, Milan Bajić

Polytechnicum Zagradiense (Croatia)

ltepes@2vz.hr, m@bajicvz.hr

Abstract

In this era of intense student mobility, availability and possibilities of new media which still have not been entirely researched, speaking a foreign language is of key importance for communication, education, work, progress, etc. Children in Croatia start learning a foreign language from the first year of primary school, even though they have the opportunity to learn a foreign language even before that. There is a noticeable domination of the English language when we talk about learning a new language, even though pupils and later students basically have a possibility of choosing other foreign languages. Not so long ago speaking German language was a necessity as well as prestige, while nowadays German has been suppressed by English. At the Polytechnic of Zagreb students can choose between 4 study groups: informatics, computer engineering, electrical engineering or civil engineering. All four study groups offer their students a possibility of learning technical German or English language. In this paper we will show through statistics which language the students have been choosing since 2005, we will try to explain why the situation is like it is and try to presuppose whether the more intense use of new media in teaching a foreign language would affect a more equal ratio in the number of students of both offered languages. Except for including new media and technologies in teaching a foreign language, which is the teacher's role, the key factor is also motivating a student to learn a foreign language.

What is troublesome is that the number of German learning students decreases every year, and it is generally troublesome compared to the number of students who have decided to learn English. Technical foreign language is extremely important for our future engineers, experts and scientists. To successfully finish one's studies presupposes the knowledge of at least one foreign language in order for young people to be competent on the international job market.

1. Introduction

Learning foreign languages is a part of our everyday life. Some children are introduced to a foreign language already in kindergarten, and learning one or more foreign languages is mandatory during both primary and secondary school. It is being assumed that the students learnt the basics of a foreign language throughout their mandatory education and that they learnt the grammar. When the language in question is for example German, grammar is often the difficult and problematic part as well as the assumption that German is "difficult" itself.

2. The role of motivation in learning a foreign language

There are different motives for learning a foreign language. Jakovac and Pavić (2011) differentiate between three types of motivation: the one related to usage and communication, integrative one and affective motivation. According to Jakovac and Pavić, motivation related to usage and communication is connected to the individual's desire to use the foreign language for practical reasons and their desire to communicate with native speakers. Integrative motivation refers to the individual's identification with the cultural-linguistic community of the language they are trying to learn. The third type of motivation, affective motivation, refers to those people who learn the language for the sake of the language itself. Jakovac and Pavić point out two important de-motivators. De-motivator when we speak about the situation in class happens when the student does not like the teacher's, or professor's teaching methods, teaching materials or teacher's characteristics. De-motivator of learning difficulties happens when students find it impossible to learn the learning matter because they find the matter too difficult or complicated or they do not possess sufficient previous knowledge in order to learn the new matter.

According to Jakovac and Pavić learning strategies can be divided into 6 groups and they are related to the learning motivation because the more the pupils or the students are motivated, the more often they use learning strategies with which they contribute to the independent learning and by that



improve the teaching process itself. Learning strategies are memory, cognitive, compensational, metacognitive, affective and social. It is very important to get to know the students and motivate them for learning a foreign language because speaking one or possibly more foreign languages is a necessity nowadays. Speaking a foreign language is important for almost all fields of work (communications, business, economy, etc.) Regardless the global presence of English language and assumption that your collocutor speaks it, the best way to understand and interact with the collocutor is to speak with them in their own language. Speaking the language leaves an important first impression and potentially opens the door to the future.

With the above stated three basic types of motivation, there is a number of other reasons why to learn a foreign language: leisure activities become more enjoyable, be it watching foreign language movies, travelling, or something similar, your intellect is being developed because learning a foreign language encourages memorization, improves learning habits, introduces you to a new point of view typical of that foreign language and its culture, your practical skills that might be used elsewhere are being built, etc. Nevertheless, the economical motive, that is work, is often a strong enough driver for learning a foreign language, whether the student, and later employee, stayed in their country or they planned to work abroad. Knowing a foreign language is almost as important as having the knowledge of the trade itself. Speaking a foreign language offers the students multiple opportunities for employment.

Beside the fact that a foreign language is an obligatory subject during primary and secondary education and pupils learn it because they have to, foreign languages are also learnt at Croatian colleges and universities. At the Polytechnic of Zagreb the students have the choice to learn English or German language during two semesters.

3. The importance of learning German language

Considering the globalization, the Internet and how fast the communication nowadays is, it is important to stress out the role and importance of learning German. Croatia recently became a member of the EU where there are 24 official languages. German takes the fourth place according to the number of people speaking it in the EU and according to some researches, it has been ranked as the twelfth language in the world considering the number of people speaking it. Nevertheless, the position of German language in Central Europe cannot be denied. Around 100 million people in Central Europe speak German, and throughout Europe it is being learnt in a number of countries as a foreign language.

Learning a foreign language is closely linked to the economical and social situation. The language policy should follow the global world events meaning that, except for English, learning other foreign languages should be promoted. For Croatia it means learning German considering our geographical, economical and maybe even historical position. Naturally, possibilities of learning a foreign language are unlimited and none of the languages can be highlighted as more important, because it is about the individual's preferences and needs.

Important factors in teaching foreign languages are age, motivation, readiness for communication, fear of language, strategy, etc (Medved-Krajnović: 2012), and therefore the teacher should become aware of the need to approach the learning of language individually as well, as much as the situation allows.

4. Role of the Internet and new technologies

Big changes that happened related to the Internet and global communication affected the teaching of foreign languages a lot. Therefore the theories, the methods, the approaches and the focuses in teaching of foreign languages developed very fast (Medved-Krajnović: 2012). Teachers of foreign languages simply must keep up with the modern world in order to keep the students' attention and additionally motivate them for learning. It is not only about topics interesting to students, but also the means of teaching because computers, mobile phones and tablets are not only a necessity anymore but also a part of our everyday life. Multimedia materials facilitate the learning of foreign languages and the Internet gave it a whole new dimension (Kužić, Plićanić Mesić:2010). Using of recorded audio and video materials enables revision according to the student's needs with the recorded correct pronunciation. The Internet is basically an endless source of material for teaching of foreign language. The user has access to the language being learnt through the Internet, there is a possibility of communicating with native speakers, listening, reading, getting to know a certain culture. The possibilities of the Internet are endless for all the users, including the ones who are in the process of learning a foreign language. Therefore using the Internet in teaching of foreign language became very important.

Web 2.0 technologies enable intense and multi-channel communication, long-distance team work and fast and dynamic changes in teaching materials. Students are no longer passive receivers of information but active participants in the educational process. With interactivity in class, time of learning and complexity being individually adjusted to the student, a much higher level of satisfaction and involvement in set tasks can be achieved.

5. Polytechnicum Zagrabiense and foreign language students

Polytechnicum Zagrabiense was founded in 1998 meaning it has been a part of Croatian higher education for fifteen years already. There are six technical studies on PTZ: electrical engineering, civil engineering, informatics, computer engineering, mechanical engineering and mechatronics. With the mentioned technical studies, there are also specialized studies on PTZ, and there are 4000 enrolled students in total in PTZ.

Total classes performed at PTZ include classes of a foreign language during two semesters because PTZ recognized the importance of knowing a foreign language. Beside the trade knowledge the students get during their study, what is also very important is presentation and being able to apply that knowledge within the frames of other areas of speaking which opens multiple possibilities to the individuals. We will show a situation related to the choice and learning of foreign languages at PTZ where students can choose between English and German as a foreign language of trade.

The table down shows the number of students who learn English or German language from the academic year 2005/2006 until today keeping in mind that the number of enrolled students on certain technical studies is still unknown because the enrollment is still in the process.

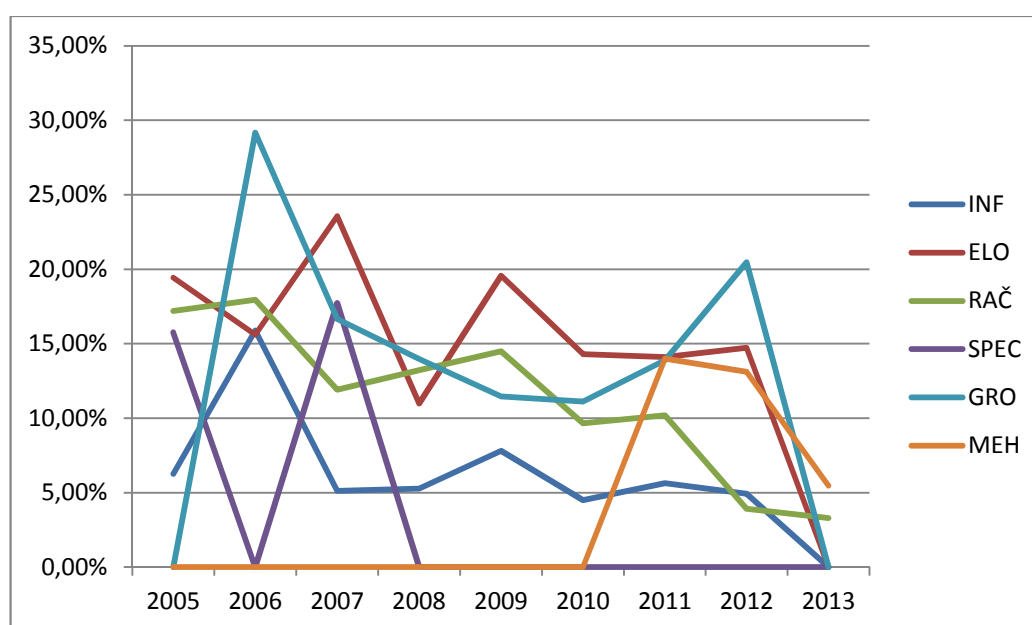
Table 1.

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14 ¹
ENG-									
INF	208	214	215	209	205	222	160	122	0
GER-									
INF	13	34	11	11	16	10	9	6	0
ENG-									
ELO	175	173	191	191	184	210	156	163	0
GER-									
ELO	34	27	45	21	36	30	22	24	0
ENG-									
COM	93	117	126	121	138	145	108	102	91
GER-									
COM	16	21	15	16	20	14	11	4	3
ENG-									
SPEC	146	0	124	0	0	0	0	0	0
GER-									
SPEC	23	0	22	0	0	0	0	0	0
ENG-									
CIV	0	48	66	93	96	90	72	44	0
GER-	0	14	11	13	11	10	10	9	0

¹ At the moment there are still no data about the number of enrolled students because the enrollment still has not finished.

CIV									
ENG-									
MEC	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	61	55
GER-									
MEC	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	8	3
ENG-									
TOT	622	552	722	614	623	667	546	492	146
GER-									
TOT	86	96	104	61	83	64	59	51	6

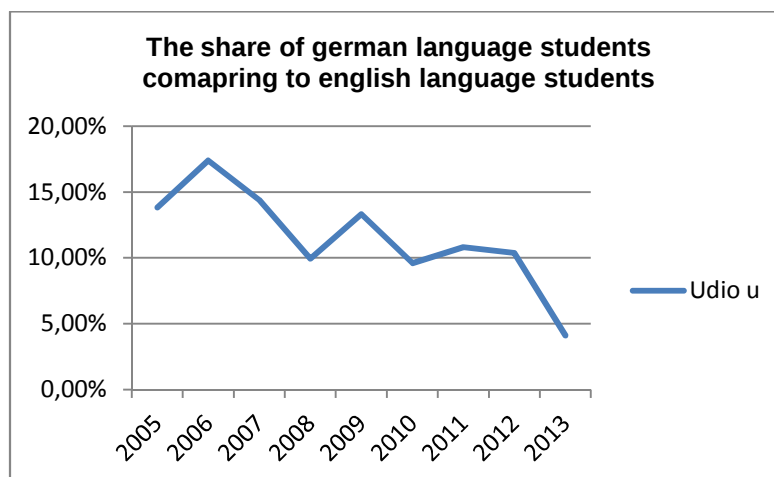
From the diagram of the situation of learning a foreign language it can be seen that throughout the years the biggest number of students learning German is on the technical study of electrical engineering followed by the technical study of civil engineering:



The share of students learning German language is significantly smaller than the one of students learning English which can be clearly seen from the percentages.

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
ENG-									
TOT	622	552	722	614	623	667	546	492	146
GER-									
TOT	86	96	104	61	83	64	59	51	6
	13,83%	17,39%	14,40%	9,93%	13,32%	9,60%	10,81%	10,37%	4,11%

The share of German-learning students was the biggest in 2006 and it made up 15% of the total number of enrolled students. Since then there has been a slow but constant decline in the number of students learning German.



6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the number of students on PTZ learning German we noticed a major difference in the number of students of the offered languages. Most of the students decide to study English while the number of students choosing German language has been in a constant decline.

The reasons for such trend could be multiple: students are introduced to English from very early age and they learn it as a mandatory subject during their entire education, presumption that German is "difficult", approach and way of teaching German by the teachers/professors, the media where the dominant language is English, etc. In order to stop such negative trend of learning German language, there is a tendency to explain the importance of knowing another foreign language to the students, which is German in the case of PTZ. It is important to make the approach to the materials more simple and available via technological gadgets and communicational technologies, and enable the individual dynamics of learning the matter. Even now it has been assumed that the graduated students speak English of trade and they will have further possibilities if they speak at least one more foreign language. This knowledge does not necessarily have to be on C1 level of writing and understanding, but it has to provide the individual with the basic communication skills and a possibility of work.

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