Creativity of the Polish Students in Foreign Language Learning: The Benefits of English in the Process of Acquisition of German

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Abstract

The authors present the results of their research done among the Polish students of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics who learn English as a first foreign language in addition to German as a second foreign language. The authors focus on the use of creativity in the process of the effective learning of foreign languages. The creative aspect of language use that can be observed in the foreign language acquisition is frequently limited to occasional playful activities with language and its structures. As the result, however, such an activity can support the process of acquisition as such, as could be recognized, for example, on the level of the pronunciation, the grammatical structures or the lexical structures. The point of departure here could be the confrontation between two parallel acquired foreign languages used by the students. The study shows through many examples e.g. how English can help and facilitate learning of German, how it can be an opportunity to enrich the knowledge of German, to succeed in learning it well, to use German grammar structures and vocabulary in appropriate contexts, to improve memorizing of taught material during German classes as well as be a source for positive transfer into German.

Keywords: *creativity, similarities, benefits, English, German.*

The ongoing globalization in the cultural, economic and political life, mobility and continuous development of the Internet have made more and more people in Poland learn foreign languages. In Polish society, you can see a very strong increase in interest in learning English. Next, the German language is mastered due to the geopolitical situation of the country. That is why the offer of Polish universities has expanded to the possibility of simultaneous study of these two languages, for example in the field of applied linguistics. In the course of study it is usually necessary not only to master the substantive content, but above all, to develop the ability to freely "switch" between two language systems, none of which is the mother tongue of students. In this context it is worth answering some questions. Is the study of closely related languages a facilitation for Poland's students, or rather a full handicap? How do they deal with the difficulties encountered in the process of acquiring new codes of communication between people?

This article will be an attempt to answer such questions. The results of the survey conducted in June 2019 will be presented and analysed among first, second and third year students of the first degree of Applied Linguistics at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland in groups studying English and German in parallel. 57 people participated in the study. The questionnaire contained 7 questions that concerned students' experiences in the process of learning English as the first foreign language and German as a second foreign language, and especially their ability to creatively compare both language systems. Particular attention was focused on the ability to look for analogies, but also on the perception of differences between languages on different levels of language.

Questionnaire
1. How long have you been studying English?
2. Where did you learn English?
3. How long have you been studying German?
4. Where did you learn German?
5. What similarities do you see between English and German? Please give 4-5 examples.
a) in terms of pronunciation
b) in the field of morphology
c) in the field of syntax
d) in the field of lexis
6. Do you think English can be useful in learning German? Please justify giving examples.
7. Do you think that learning English has a positive / negative effect on the learning process of another foreign language?

Table 1. Questionnaire

In foreign language teaching, one of the basic concepts is transfer. Language transfer is a diverse phenomenon. If the already developed habits and acquired skills transferred to the language that is being mastered are the source of language difficulties and errors, then the transfer is negative (the phenomenon of interference).

The positive transfer, which is the subject of these considerations, takes place where the similarities and associations of elements of one language, e.g. native language and / or the first foreign language, facilitate the process of acquiring and remembering selected elements of particular subsystems in the process of learning the second, third or even further a foreign language [cf. Kurcz 2000: 185; Harden 2006: 60].

It should also be noted that students (regardless of the kind of transfer) at some stage of the learning process become creative and innovative, which is reflected in their linguistic creativity [1]. It is obvious that this happens only at higher levels of learning, when the learners become more and more aware [2] of the rules governing language structures and have a richer vocabulary. Depending on their language skills, their creativity can be a kind of support for the learning process (e.g. by creating a loose sequence of associations that allow to remember new lexemes, word relationships or idioms). It can also lead to the creation of a specific "modern metalanguage [...], with the help of which young philologists designate the existing reality and comment on everyday events, getting into verbal contact with their interlocutors" [Kurzyńska 2010: 232]. The degree of creativity demonstrated by learners depends to a large extent on themselves, their linguistic potential or the tendencies to play with words.

According to the survey, students show a quite natural tendency to refer to what is already known to them. Therefore, they use the knowledge of an already acquired foreign language, which is English, which they learn on average for 16 years (Q1), to learn from selected words, forms, rules, structures and constructions in another language, such as German that they acquire from 3 to 12 years (Q3). Interestingly, English accompanies learners throughout their education from kindergarten, middle school, high school to university, which is declared by 56 people (Q2). In the case of German, learning takes less time, the first contact with this language, the respondents usually had in junior high school or secondary school (32 people learned German in primary school). It was only during the studies that 12 people began to learn this language (Q4). Regardless of where and when the learning of a foreign language has taken place, one cannot eliminate what is in the consciousness of the learners. It is always a creative process [see Chomsky 1991], which means that students will sooner or later experiment with a given language. Therefore, if a learner knows more than one foreign language, he or she begins to look for similarities between languages in terms of pronunciation, spelling, grammatical structures or vocabulary. Such conscious linguistic behaviour is one of the manifestations of linguistic creativity on the part of the learner. Its aim is to facilitate and accelerate the learning process and to obtain benefits, such as, for example, free and understandable communication with a native speaker of a given language.

To check how common this phenomenon is, students were asked to answer what similarities they see between English and German and to give examples (Q5). In the case of a phonic system, the respondents focused on sound similarities that greatly facilitate their pronunciation learning, e.g.: *fish – Fisch, house – Haus, person – Person.* They also drew attention to a similar type of intonation in questions, i.e. rising intonation.

With regard to the morphological and syntactic system, students reported that convergences in English and German grammatical structures give them the opportunity to shorten and facilitate learning, e.g.: regular and irregular verbs: 3 verb forms: *begin-began-begun – beginnen-begann-begonnen,* forming auxiliaries *have* and *haben* in forming tenses, rection: *thank for – sich bedanken für,* articles: *a new car – ein neues Auto*, forming comparatives and superlatives of an adjective: *long-longer-the longest – lang-länger, der/die/das längste/am längsten*, pronouns: *my – mein*, forming passives (*It was told – Es wurde gesagt*), forming infinitives with *to – zu (I try to learn – Ich versuche zu lernen),* forming tenses: Present Perfect – Perfekt, Past Perfect – Plusquamperfekt, Futur Simple – Futur I, word order in simple sentence: subject + verb + rest, inversion in questions: verb + subject + rest.

Noteworthy is the fact that they see a number of analogies in these languages and are able to use it in a practical way. In the questionnaires similar conclusions are repeated, e.g. regarding the rules of creating a passive voice: "auxiliary verb and third form of the verb", its frequency of use, but also the statement explicitly: "Passive voice in English has helped me learn the passive voice in German". Creativity of learners results, therefore, from the association of specific linguistic facts. The students' creativity is also indicated by the fact that they try to transplant the syntax rules in English into the

German syntax. An important point that is worth mentioning is the word formation. The respondents notice similarities among other things in the mechanisms of creating complex nouns, e.g.: *week-end – Wochen-ende*, *work-place – Arbeits-platz, snow-man – Schnee-mann;* derivation with suffix *–er* for the performer of an activity, e.g. *drive/driver – fahren/Fahrer* or in way of forming adjectives/adverbs with contrary meaning with prefixes *in*-/*im*-/*un*-, e.g.: *clear/unclear – klar/unklar, possible/ impossible – möglich/unmöglich*.

In the case of the lexical and semantic system, creative thinking of learners is even more transparent. The respondents wrote about graphical similarity, creating associations between languages and Anglicisms. The facilities that were mentioned by students and examples given by them are presented in the table below:

Spelling or phonetic similarity	*to find - finden, adjective - Adjektiv, family - Familie, mouse - Maus, emotional - emotional*
Associations	*book - Buch, milk - Milch, o tolerate - tolerieren, king - König*
Anglicisms	*T-Shirt, Party, Job, Interview*

Table 2. Facilities in the lexicon

They perceive many internationalisms in both languages, e.g. *theatre – Theater,* they can justify their presence, for example, originating from Latin or French. It is also worth emphasizing that the respondents use the knowledge of German according to their own abilities, needs and individual goals. It can therefore be assumed that previous linguistic experience gained from the learning process of the first and the next foreign language can have a positive effect on the learning of the next language when the student uses and activates the previously acquired knowledge, i.e. transfers educated habits and language skills, e.g. mastered patterns in the field of pronunciation, grammatical or semantic structures on currently acquired language material, to bypass difficulties while learning another language.

Recognizing the existing convergences between languages allows for greater creativity in learning a foreign language, but it helps also in the selection of methods for assimilating further linguistic issues. It is known that learning must be accompanied by the ability to consciously reflect on the language acquired. Thanks to it, the student can recall his own language and extra-linguistic experience [cf. Bawej 2013: 20]. That's why the answers to Q6 were important in the study. Most students answered that English can be useful in learning of German, e.g.: "Many grammatical structures are similar, and English pronunciation facilitates reading borrowed words from English in German", "It helps me a lot, because many words and grammatical constructions are similar in both languages".

 It should be emphasized here that students also notice the negative impact of English when learning German in the form of interference errors. Respondents wrote, e. g. : "It helps, but you have to be careful because some of the structures may differ in spite of the similarities", "You have to watch out for 'false friends', e. g. *confident/Konfident*, *gift/das Gift.* This fact also confirmed the answers to (Q7): "The similarities in spelling and pronunciation may be confusing", "There are constructions similar but different", "It bothers if the words are formally similar, but different in meaning".

The answer to the seventh question indicates too that most linguistics students are of the opinion that previous experience in learning foreign languages may facilitate the learning of new languages. Facilitations concern learning in the scope of individual language subsystems, as well as the techniques of working on the language themselves. Students justified this, among others in this way: "Language intuition develops, which can help in using a different language", "Thanks to the analysis of the similarities and differences we learn quickly other languages", "You can remember new words and structures on associations", "You can find analogies in vocabulary and grammar", "Yes, because there are Anglicism in many languages", "Because with each subsequent one it is easier to learn", "Because knowledge of one foreign language motivates to learn other languages".

The results of the survey show that knowledge of English can significantly facilitate the acquisition of another foreign language. Language creativity increases at further stages of learning, which is mainly the result of increasing awareness of a given language as a system and increasing knowledge of grammar and lexis. By comparing selected elements in languages, it is easier to see similar language mechanisms, which in turn allows both efficient mastering of rules in another foreign language and creative play with words. The purpose of these activities is one – the all-embracing and habitual use of appropriate structures for the fluent use of languages without causing disruptions or misunderstandings. Does the first foreign language have to be English? Let us answer with the words

of one of the respondents, who in reply to one of the questions, writes as follows: "I think that every new language is useful in learning the next one, it does not even have to be English". Let this commentary, in our opinion, extremely accurate, be the summary of this analysis.

[1] Creativity as the mental process expresses by creating connections between languages structures, linking a new knowledge with the acquired knowledge, continuous searching for new ideas, which accelerate learning. In this sense creativity is a characteristic of a sociolect. More about sociolects – see Grabias 1994: 117-118.
[2] About language and linguistic awareness – see Bugajski 2007: 47-53.

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