

Primary and lower-secondary learners' beliefs about foreign language learning

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Learners' beliefs about themselves and about foreign languages and their learning have been in the focus of educational research because they are considered fundamental to learners' progress (e.g. Arnold 1999, Dörnyei 2001, Richards & Lockhart 1994, Wenden and Rubin 1987). This paper focuses on beliefs of Czech 8 to 15-year-old learners learning foreign languages in a school context. I investigated these beliefs in order to collect baseline, background information needed for my study on learners' attitudes to the European Language Portfolio, which is a current project of the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe. The examined aspects of the beliefs combine two dimensions of language learning: 1) the affective dimension including the intrinsic value placed on language learning, enjoyment caused by this activity and the learners' attitudes to language learning and 2) the self-concept-related dimension.

The sample I investigated consisted of 893 learners of English, German and French from the whole country taught by 52 teachers in 54 classes and 39 schools, comprising primary and lower-secondary schools, schools with extended language learning and eight-year grammar schools. The majority of the learners were learners of English ($n = 585$, $M = 65.51$), less than one-third learners of German ($n = 292$, $M = 32.70$) and only one class was a class of learners of French ($n = 16$, $M = 1.79$). The highest number of the learners ($M = 29.90$) was from Year Seven (aged 13), the second biggest group ($M = 19.82$) was from Year Five (aged 11) and the third from Year Eight (learners aged 14, $M = 16.01$).

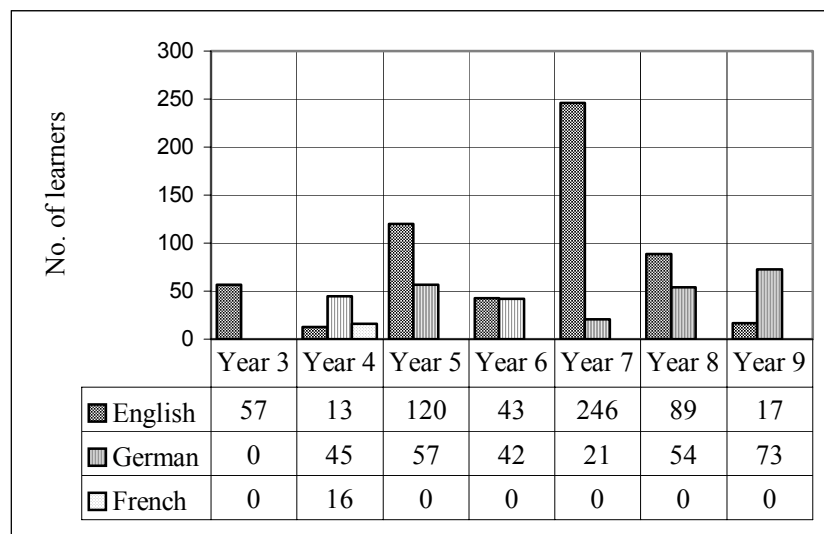


Fig 1. The year breakdown of the sample

The frequency of the individual types of schools in the sample did not correspond to the Czech context, since the frequency of the *elite* schools (schools with extended language learning and eight-year grammar schools) exceeded greatly their overall frequency in the country: more than a half of the learners, 52.18 per cent of the total, studied in them. Moreover, a non-probability method of sampling was used, i.e. the teachers could enrol in the project on the basis of their interest, which threatens external validity of the findings. Due to the enrolment, the teachers in the sample appeared to have a special quality: a deeper interest in the teaching profession. Having said that, a high percentage of unqualified and inexperienced teachers participated in the project: altogether 30.77 per cent of unqualified teachers (plus the qualifications of 5.77 per cent of the teachers are unknown) and in addition 9.61 per cent of inexperienced teachers, thus to a certain extent reflecting the situation in Czech schools and in foreign language teaching in particular.

The questionnaire used was based on two different sources: the first group of questions, comprising two statements, was inspired by the questionnaire used by the Schools Council 1968, surveying British secondary school students' attitudes to foreign language learning (Williams and Burden 1997:126). The second group of questions contained five slightly adapted statements chosen from Horwitz's inventory of learners' beliefs about language learning (Horwitz 1987:127-128). The statements were chosen and adapted to suit the age of the learners and the purpose of the study. The return rate was quite high, 78 per cent ($n = 701$), (unfortunately the French class did not submit the questionnaire) but because some data were missing in three classes, the number of completely analyzed questionnaires reduced to 660, which presents 74 per cent of all the learners involved.

The first question examined the value that the learners placed on language learning. The results depict the learners' responses to a four-point Likert-like scale: *Learning a foreign language is (a) useful and interesting, (b) useful but boring, (c) interesting but useless, and (d) useless and boring.*

Table 1
Learners' interest in foreign language learning

<i>Learning a foreign language is</i>					Total
Useful and interesting 4	Useful but boring 3	Interesting but useless 2	Useless and boring 1	Not supplied	
560	132	3	3	3	701
79.89%	18.83%	0.43%	0.43%	0.43%	100%

(The percentage does not add up to exactly 100 per cent because of rounding.)

The frequency of occurrence of the learners who consider language learning both useful and interesting is extremely high, nearly 80 per cent, whereas the percentage of the learners considering language learning useless is negligible. Approximately every fifth learner evaluated language learning as useful but boring.

When comparing the learners' opinions to an independent variable, i.e. the learners' grades on their school reports, fewer categories were made. The first contained only the learners totally satisfied with language learning, finding it both interesting and enjoyable, and the second comprised all the remaining learners, i.e. those who objected to language learning and evaluated it either as boring, or useless, or as both useless and boring. With regard to the learners' grades, two categories were made too, the first combining the learners with the best grades (i.e. grades one and two) and the second combining the learners with grades three, four and five. A contingency table was made and the chi-square test used, with the alpha level set at a level lower than .01, meaning that only a one per cent chance of error was tolerated (this alpha level was used in the study in all contingency tables). Statistically significant results were found, showing that an association exists between the learners' attitudes to language learning and their school grades: as expected, the better the grades, the more positive the learners' attitudes to language learning are.

Table 2
Learners' interest in foreign language learning in relation to the learners' school grades

4			
5	Learning a foreign language is		
	Useful and interesting	Useful but boring + Interesting but useless + Useless and boring	
Grades			
1 + 2	429	83	512
3 – 5	97	51	148
	526	134	660

$p < .01$
 $\chi^2 = 23.6245$

When checking the results for boys and girls separately, a difference occurred: there was no significant relationship between the girls' attitudes and their grades. Whereas the boys' attitudes were associated with their grades and the boys' positive attitudes increased with the better grades, the girls found language learning useful and interesting regardless of their grades.

Table 3
Girls' interest in foreign language learning in relation to their school grades

Learning a foreign language is

Girls – Grades	Useful and interesting	Useful but boring + Interesting but useless + Useless and boring	
1 + 2	265	52	317
3 – 5	49	19	68
	314	71	385

$$p < .01$$

$$\chi^2 = 4.9553$$

The following table shows the learners' opinions on the difficulty of the foreign language, responding to the Likert-type scale ranging from *very difficult*, to *very easy* (*English/German is very difficult, difficult, neither difficult nor easy, easy and very easy*).

Table 4
Learners' beliefs about the difficulty of foreign languages

<i>English/German is</i>					
Very difficult	Difficult	Neither difficult nor easy	Easy	Very easy	Not supplied
1	2	3	4	5	
42	154	439	53	11	2

The number of the responses evaluating the foreign language as difficult highly exceeds the number of the responses evaluating the language as easy. However, contrary to common beliefs, observed frequencies do not differ significantly for English and German, i.e. the learners do not evaluate one of the languages as more difficult as can be seen from the following contingency table.

Table 5
Learners' beliefs about the difficulty of English and German

The difficulty of the language	Difficult + very difficult	Neither difficult nor easy	Very easy + easy		Not supplied
	1 + 2	3	4 + 5		
English	127	306	44	477	
German	69	133	20	222	2
	196	439	64	699	2

$$p < .0.1$$

$$\chi^2 = 1.5140$$

When applying the statistical procedure already mentioned, i.e. using the learners' grades as an independent variable and comparing the learners' perceived difficulty of the language to the learners' grades, the value obtained exceeds the value required for significance: high-achieving learners do not perceive the language as difficult so frequently.

An association was revealed between the perceived difficulty of the language and the learners' ages: young learners did not find languages too difficult, but the older the learners, the more difficult the languages appeared to them (however, there was not a big difference between the critical value and the observed value).

The evaluation of the second foreign language that some of the learners studied differed: statistically significant differences were found in the evaluation of the perceived difficulty of English and German. When studied as a second foreign language, English was considered easier than German and, correspondingly, German was considered more difficult than English.

To triangulate the data about the perceived difficulty of the languages, the statement *I learn languages easily* was used, with the scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (*strongly disagree, disagree, I don't know, agree, strongly agree*) and a correlation was sought between the responses and the learners' grades by chi-square statistic. Fewer categories were made in the contingency table to make the comparison feasible.

Table 6
Learners' beliefs about their ability to learn foreign languages

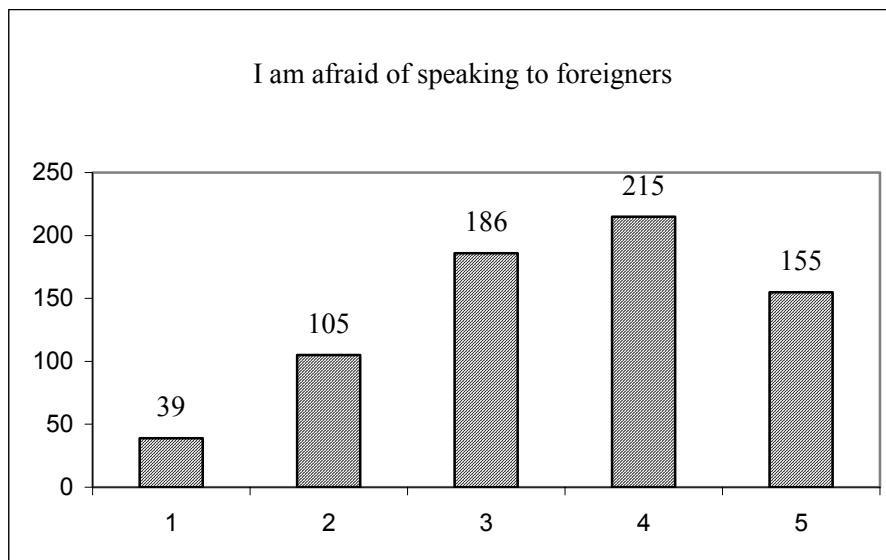
I learn languages easily

Grades	Disagree	I don't know	Agree	Not supplied
	1 + 2	3	4 + 5	
1 + 2	184	127	200	511
3 – 5	91	37	20	148
	275	164	220	659
				1

$p < .0.1$
 $\chi^2 = 40.4300$

A high correlation between the responses was found: the better the learners, the more self-confident they are about their linguistic abilities. However, an association between the learners' perceived difficulty of language learning and the learners' ages was not confirmed and statistically significant results about the relationship between these variables were not found.

The learners' perception of the difficulty of the foreign languages was examined by an additional item that focused on the learners' anxiety about using the foreign language in public (*I am afraid of speaking to foreigners*).



1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = I don't know, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly isagree
(one response not supplied)

Fig. 2. Learners' anxiety about using the foreign language in public

The number of the learners who feel confident about speaking to foreigners highly exceeds the number of those who feel intimidated by this challenge. Contrary to common beliefs that learners having good grades are often shy, a positive correlation between learners' good school grades and learners' lack of anxiety about using the foreign language was found: the high-achievers were less afraid of using the language. Having said that, the gender breakdown of the tallies showed that this relationship existed only in the case of girls, not in the case of boys. There was not a significant difference between high-achieving and low-achieving boys and their anxiety about using the foreign language.

Three items focused on the learners' beliefs about language learning, accompanied again by a Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The items focused on language components and learning procedures: *The most important thing is to learn words*, *The most important thing is to learn grammar* and *The most important thing is to translate the sentences from Czech*.

Table 7
Learners' beliefs about the ways of foreign language learning

The most important thing is ...	Strongly disagree	Disagree	I don't know	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Not supplied
	1	2	3	4	5		
To learn words	42	137	94	265	162	3.53	1
To learn grammar	14	119	204	264	99	3.45	1
To translate the sentences from Czech	38	147	150	260	105	3.35	1

In all three items the frequency of occurrence of the learners who find such learning important highly exceeds the frequency of those who consider it unimportant. Interestingly, the positive responses to all three items are similar, with the mean between 3.3 and 3.6. The highest mean relates to learning words – 3.53, then to learning grammar – 3.45 and the lowest to the translation from the mother tongue – 3.35. Statistically significant relationships between these items were examined as well as the relationship between the beliefs about the importance attached to grammar learning and the learners' anxiety about using foreign languages but significant relationships were not found. Significant differences also did not occur between high-achievers and low-achievers and their beliefs about the importance of learning the items listed in the table.

The study of the learners' beliefs, i.e. of the learning microcontext, confirmed that societal influences, i.e. macrocontextual influences on language learning, are reflected in it. Czech society generally attaches a great significance to the ability to communicate in foreign languages and this significance reflected in the beliefs of the learners in the study. The learners expressed their strong interest in language learning and they believed in the high prestige of this activity. However, though a majority of them evaluated languages as neither difficult nor easy, more than one fifth perceived them as difficult, which applied both to

English and to German, especially when learned as the first foreign language. More than 40 per cent of the learners indicated that they did not learn languages easily. Having said that, the fact that more than half of the learners felt confident about speaking to foreigners sounds very promising.

References:

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