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**GERMAN AS A SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT CZECH  
SCHOOLS**

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*Abstract*

The European concept of multilingualism 2+1 poses a great challenge to the Czech Republic. The changing policy of the language education in the recent decades shows that there is a lack of a consistent language policy. At present, the 2+1 concept is officially required only at the lower secondary education level. At the higher secondary education level only one foreign language is usually mandatory - English. Despite the importance of German as the language of our neighbours, German language education does not have an easy position within the Czech schools as German is perceived as harsh, difficult and supposedly unnecessary in today's modern world. This paper presents the results of a qualitative survey research conducted among 100 teachers of German in the Czech Republic aimed at finding out what problems these teachers encounter when teaching German as an additional foreign language. The data was gathered by means of a written response to a question and a focus group interview. The results of the research show that the attitude of the students towards learning German constitutes a major problem for the teachers and presents a great challenge for their work.

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## 1. Introduction

The knowledge of foreign languages has been always regarded as a particularly valuable asset for any person to have. Additionally today, a good command of foreign languages is perceived as a significant aspect within one's education. It is therefore natural that in the time of the new European democratic order, at the turn of the century a new European concept of multilingualism was born. Its aim is with the aid of the foreign language knowledge and, in particular, with the knowledge of the neighbouring countries' languages to promote the European integration process within the economic sphere and within the sphere of interpersonal and cross-cultural relations. According to the European Commission, it is the cross-cultural awareness and its better understanding that holds the key to a more peaceful coexistence and at the same time to the development of our society (Müllerová at al. 2013).

## 2. Problem Statement

The Czech Republic with its population of ten million belongs to the category of smaller nations, therefore the successful integration into the European and global order constitutes an existential necessity for its further development. Accordingly, it can be legitimately required of the political representation of the country to create such conditions that will enable corresponding integration for the Czech nation and its inhabitants. The knowledge of foreign languages represents a necessary prerequisite for such process. The combination of both factors - an individual interest supported by the appropriate social conditions - presents the correct way for the realization of the current European concept of multilingualism.

Despite the recommendations of the European institutions in the area of language education, after the political change of course at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the Czech language policy has been following a very unusual path. During the last twenty years, the Czech language policy has not demonstrated the aspects of a stable development; quite on the contrary it can be argued that the question of the foreign language education in the Czech schools has gone through rather complicated and ambiguous development. The situation that happened right after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 reflected a logical reaction to the new socio-political environment and the new opportunities in relation to the neighbouring states.

The opening of the borders to the (not only) neighbouring countries, which were unreachable for almost half a century to the majority of the residents of then the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR), caused a tremendous demand for the language education, especially of German. As the data of the Ministry of Education show from the given period of time, a significant part of the Czech pupils and students in that time chose German as their first foreign language. The reasons for the choice of German as the first foreign language are quite understandable – the proximity of German speaking countries, which were economically at completely different stage, the opportunities to visit these countries either for the purpose of shopping or for the gain of relatively lucrative job positions compared to the incomes in the CSSR, eventually simply the possibility to discover so far the unavailable areas west or southwest of our borders served as enough persuasive reasons.

The beginning of the twenty-first century brought an essential change for the Czech school system – the new Education Act. This act was passed in 2004, came into force on the January 1, 2005 and was

supposed to become a fundamental milestone in the development and democratization of the Czech education through the form of the enactment of the Framework Educational Programme (FEP) and the creation of school educational programmes. For many (not only) educators an illogical and incomprehensible decision of the Czech government to eliminate the foreign language education within the secondary schools system turned out as a big negative intervention into the existing concept of the foreign language education. It was unequivocally recommended within the new curriculum for secondary schools to implement English as the first foreign language. The obligation of the second foreign language learning was removed, and the educational field called "additional foreign language" was shifted to the category of the compulsory elective subjects, where it had to "compete" with the other subjects such as sports games, English conversation or cooking and therefore there was a very limited chance for this subject to catch on. As a result of this political decision, there has been a significant reduction in the number of students who have acquired a second foreign language at school.

With this stance and with the newly defined conditions for the teaching of foreign languages in the FEP, the Czech language policy was essentially inconsistent with the EU's efforts and the European linguistic policy. The European policy has been presenting and supporting multilingualism since the early 1990s and its "2+1 model" - the knowledge of the mother tongue plus two foreign languages - encourages the European Union Member States to support and implement this language concept within their national education systems. The decision of the Czech political representatives on the restriction of the foreign language teaching was therefore regarded all the more paradoxical and often as incompetent by all the progressively-minded people, especially in the time of advancing globalization.

Due to the strong pressure of the academic as well as non-academic public, adjustments were made to the FEP during the school year 2013/14 and the second foreign language became a compulsory subject again at the lower secondary schools. In other words, this meant that the lower secondary school students would be learning again the additional foreign language from the second grade (two hours a week) or no later than from the third grade (three hours a week). Unfortunately, no change occurred at the higher level of the secondary schools, where the unfavourable situation of only one compulsory foreign language persists and it is up to the school management to decide whether to keep the additional foreign language in the category of the compulsory or the optional subjects.

The return of the additional foreign language after nearly a decade brought about a number of new questions related to, for example, an increase in the need for qualified teachers, the need for new teaching materials, an extended offer of further education etc. Considering the position of the Czech Republic and its economic, cultural and historical interdependence with the German-speaking countries, it is only natural that German has started to be taught again as an additional foreign language. Although the language teachers were calling for the return of the additional foreign language, the rapid societal development, changes in the access to education and, last but not least, the difficult situation of the teachers in the Czech Republic together with this return of the additional foreign language to the curriculum brought several unexpected surprises.

### **3. Research Questions**

One research question was defined for this survey research:

What are the biggest problems that German language teachers face when teaching German as the additional foreign language?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The author of this paper, who has long been active in the field of the continuing education especially for the teachers of German, perceived a certain shift in the mood and attitude of the teachers towards teaching German. In the context of seminars and workshops across the Czech Republic, she has noticed a certain increased level of the teachers' scepticism about the course offered and discussed creative activities intended for the students. It was manifested in particular by the frequent expressions of the educators that "the students would not participate in this", "it is too complicated for them (students)", "I am not sure if they would find it interesting", "I don't have time for this within my lesson at all" etc. Considering these issues, the author decided to carry out a small survey research, which could help to reveal the current problems of German language teachers at the Czech schools.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The research was carried out between February and June 2018 in the Czech Republic. The target group was the German language teachers from the Czech lower secondary schools (corresponding to ISCED 2 of the international classification) and from the Czech higher secondary schools (ISCED 3). 100 Czech educators of German - 69 of whom were the teachers at the lower secondary schools and 31 were the higher secondary school teachers participated in the research. All the respondents were also the participants in the training courses of further education of pedagogical employees (FEPE). This fact is very important because FEPE within the specific educational field is not mandatory for the Czech teachers, which means that the respondents of this survey belong to a group of more active educators who are despite the difficulties interested in further education in the field of German language. With regard to the long-term experience of the author of this text in the field of teaching German as additional foreign language in the Czech Republic, one research question was formulated concerning the problems faced by German teachers when teaching, as stated above. Concurrently, three hypotheses were formulated for the planned research investigation:

- 1) German language teachers in the Czech Republic face problems that are caused by the students' behaviour when teaching.
- 2) German language teachers in the Czech Republic face problems that are caused by the lack of suitable modern teaching materials when teaching.
- 3) The ever-increasing bureaucracy constitutes a serious problem in the work of German language teachers in the Czech Republic.

The research was carried out in six different locations in the Czech Republic; the respondents participated in the survey voluntarily. The respondents were asked one open question, to which they had to provide an answer in the form of brief statement/short answers in writing within a relatively short time of about 10 minutes. The open question was stated as: What are the biggest problems that you as a

language teacher face when teaching German as the additional foreign language? The responses could be written either in Czech or German.

Subsequently, a short group discussion was held with a total of 6 groups of the respondents. Out of the 100 respondents, 98 of them provided answers containing the minimum of three problematic factors; two respondents answered the question with a brief one-word statement - "nothing". On average, four to five problematic factors appeared in the respondents' answers, the most detailed statement contained nine problematic points. In the following analysis of the obtained data the order of the mentioned problems is not reflected, the decisive criterion was the content of the described problematic factor.

## 6. Findings

The following findings presented below reflect the analysis of the factors that were mentioned by the minimum of 50% of the respondents. The following were the main factors derived from the analysis.

### 6.1. Lack of motivation

From the analytical processing of the acquired verbal data through the form of open coding ensued that 78% of respondents considered the lack of motivation or even the lack of interest in the subject from the students as a problem when teaching German. Such a high number is quite surprising and it would be worth further research to recognize what specifically the teachers perceive as the student's lack of interest in the subject. The subsequent short group discussions have revealed this problem a little more - the teachers often complained about the lack of interest from the students in German, which some students perceive as rather difficult language to learn and not really necessary for their life. For example, the respondents mentioned a sentence that the students supposedly use in the situations where they have to learn new vocabularies or understand some more complex grammar: "I can speak English and with English I am able to communicate everywhere, so why should I learn *this*." It remains an open question whether the lack of interest from the students in German is caused by the general decline in their interest in the learning process (see for example the studies of the National Institution of Technical and Vocational Education 2010) or whether the way the language is taught plays some role in it as well.

The Czech Republic has long been addressing the problem of the lack of qualified foreign language teachers, and the current status of teachers in the Czech society (their social status, financial remuneration etc.) certainly does not help to make it a lucrative career either, which can logically affect the quality of work. The issue with the lack of motivation can also be related to the lack of opportunities for students to apply the acquired knowledge of the language in real life. As demonstrated by research study from 2013 (Müllerová et al., 2013), students within their school and out-of-school life receive minimal chances to actually use German as the means of communication. If they get such a chance, for example through a school trip, they are mostly inclined to communicate in English, because due to the longer learning time they feel more confident in that language. When using computer, the students work almost essentially only with the websites in English and they often perceive German as "ugly".

The results of the 2013 research study point out exactly the influence of a wide range of prejudices on the perception of German in the Czech environment - German is perceived as a language that is

insignificant, difficult, and since everyone is supposedly learning English, German is in fact regarded as unimportant. According to the author, this unilateral focus on English is a sad legacy of the inadequate Czech language policy in the early 20th century, when the preference of only one foreign language within the Czech education system had completely denied the idea of European multilingualism. In the author's opinion, the Czech society fights with this unpleasant legacy to this day.

## **6.2. Time allotted for classes**

The second most common problem that respondents reported in the answers to the research question was an insufficient time subsidy for German classes. This problematic factor was reported by 65% of the respondents. As mentioned above, the position of the additional foreign language at the Czech schools has undergone somewhat peculiar development. While the interest in learning German had skyrocketed after the Velvet Revolution (see the reasons above), from the second half of the 1990s the interest has shifted more towards English and since then has grown considerably. Consequently, English has now reached the hegemonic position among the foreign languages, also thanks to the language policy of the state. Regarding the fact that the statistics from the Ministry of Education and Sport from 2017 show that the strongest group of educators are currently the teachers between 45-64 years old (lower secondary schools 48%, higher secondary schools almost 60%), it is possible to assume that the long-time educators who had previously taught German as the first foreign language exceed the present A1 requirements. That is the level that they should reach to at the lower secondary school within the additional foreign language. In an effort to achieve a higher level, the teachers may therefore feel that the time subsidy for the additional foreign language is inadequate and that may lead to some frustration.

Another possible explanation may be the fact that schools in order to achieve the best possible reputation offer their students a large number of additional school or extra-curricular activities (field trips, cultural events, school academy, various competitions, etc.) thus many classes are cancelled and as a result the teachers do not have enough time to fulfil their language learning objectives. This fact has often come up in the subsequent group discussions as well, especially within the groups where the research was conducted in May and June 2018. The teachers stated that they are finishing/had already finished their teaching plan for the specific school year, because the program of the school in the following weeks simply does not allow them to maintain their regular teaching schedule.

## **6.3. Large student numbers**

As the third most frequently encountered problem among 61% respondents was the high number of students in the classroom. This finding is somewhat surprising, since in the Czech Republic the foreign language education has long been done according to the school regulations in smaller divided classes, which means that in the case of more than 24 students in the classroom, the headmaster should split the class into smaller groups for the foreign languages education. I presume that the problem of the higher number of students in the classes can again be related to the language policy of the state - first by removing and then by re-introducing a compulsory additional foreign language. In order to increase their attractiveness and to get the highest number of students (the schools are funded according to the number of the students), the schools have started to offer other foreign languages as well. This can of course be seen as a positive

transformation of the Czech school system. However, the problem arises when a school offers for example four foreign languages, but fails to fill a class quota for a minimum feasible number of the students for any of these languages. In such case, students have to choose a different language and as a result the number of pupils in classes can be increased. For economic reasons, the headmasters often try to make use of the maximum number of students, and the classes are merged in different ways so that only the minimum number of teachers is needed.

With regard to the financial conditions of the Czech schools (according to OECD, the Czech Republic's expenditure on education is the lowest in the European Union, see [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2016\\_eag-2016-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2016_eag-2016-en)) are such actions quite understandable. In schools especially in smaller towns or villages, there is also the fact that the total number of students in classes is only around twenty, so the obligation to split classes into smaller ones for the foreign language education is no longer there. Only in the few exceptional cases the principals decide to split the class even in these circumstances in order to improve the learning process. Mastering a foreign language is a skill that depends on a number of aspects - the time, the frequency of the training and repetition, the possibilities of applying already acquired knowledge and many others. Under these circumstances, the effectiveness of working with 12 or 24 students in the classroom is certainly entirely different.

#### **6.4. Bureaucratic burden**

The last factor that was mentioned as problematic in the work of German language teachers in more than half of the respondents' answers is the issue of the bureaucratic burden on the educators in the Czech schools. More specifically, 59% of the respondents reported it as a problem affecting their work. The fact that the bureaucratic burden within the work of the teachers at the Czech schools is rising is supported by a number of articles in the academic press or in the public media (for example annual reports of the Czech School Inspectorate, articles in the national daily *Mladá fronta*, internet portals *Česká škola*, *Aktuálně.cz*, etc.). The introduction of the FEP and SEP (School Educational Programme) in the first decade of the 21st century brought about especially great administrative burden for the Czech teachers, and the project work and project planning are associated with unprecedented bureaucracy as well. Occasional efforts to reduce such burden remain only in the level of verbal promises. The fact that Czech entrepreneurs, the Czech healthcare industry and a number of other sectors also complain about the overwhelming administration only confirms that this issue represents a real problem.

Other aspects mentioned by the respondents as problematic include issues as unattractive textbooks, the lack of the technical equipment such as not enough computers, not enough supplementary materials for German education (compared with English for example), low financial remuneration of the teachers, problems with the parents, problematic behaviour of the students etc. Due to the fact that the percentage of occurrence of these problems did not exceed the 50% threshold, these aspects were not further analysed. Nevertheless, it does not mean they should be neglected. The process of learning a language is a very individual process, both on the part of the student and the teacher. Therefore only a satisfied teacher can do a good job, because a good school is a school that both the students and also the teachers enjoy.

## 7. Conclusion

With regard to the earlier stated hypotheses and the formulated research question that aimed to explore the biggest problems that language teachers face when teaching German as the additional foreign language, based on the results of this research it is possible to claim that the hypothesis no. 3 concerning the problem of an increasing bureaucratic burden has been confirmed. The hypothesis no. 2 has not proven to be a major problem for the teachers-respondents, since it was noted it down as a problematic factor by less than half of the survey participants. The hypothesis no. 1 has not been proven unambiguously, but it can be said that students' behaviour is perceived as a certain problem, because the students' lack of interest in the subject and the resulting low motivation to learn German as additional foreign language may result in their inappropriate or inadequate behaviour. This fact actually often came up in the teachers' comments in the group discussions - students do not show interest in the new activities, they deliberately interfere the class with inadequate queries or so called witty comments, they respond inappropriately to the teachers' instructions etc.

Although the research was carried out with a relatively small number of respondents and cannot therefore be considered as representative, the results obtained at least partly reveal the difficulties faced by German teachers in the Czech primary and secondary schools. As the author works as a German language teacher in the field of didactics at the faculty of pedagogy and participates in the preparation of the future German teachers, she considers the information found through this research to be an important inspiration for her own work. At the same time, she regards the results of this survey as a big challenge to dig deeper into this topic and to reflect on these findings both as a part of the preparation of the future German teachers as well as within her own activities in the context of further education of the teaching staff.

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