

Students' Attitudes towards Foreign Languages

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Abstract

This paper analyses similarities and differences in attitudes and beliefs towards learning the German and the Italian language. The testing tool used for evaluating the attitudes is a questionnaire composed in accordance with the questionnaires used for examining attitudes towards foreign languages. The obtained results indicate that the students of both languages highly agree with the statement that the knowledge of foreign languages leads to a better social status, more successful socialisation and benefit in one's professional career. In addition, they highly agree with the statement that the teaching materials are miscellaneous, but would nevertheless want the materials to include more elements of the domicile culture. Furthermore, the results also indicate a high level of confidence in speaking both languages and a substantial level of awareness regarding the need to speak both languages. The analysis confirmed a significant difference between the learners of Italian and German; the learners of German perceive the language as more difficult than Italian. However, such subjective evaluation does not have an adverse effect on the attitudes towards the German language.

Keywords: language learning attitudes, language learning motivation, target language

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on the students' attitudes, beliefs and motivation concerning language learning. In the past two decades, Horwitz's (1987) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI) has been extensively used for various research aiming, for instance, to investigate the links between proficiency and beliefs (Mantle-Bromley, 1995), the influence of culture on beliefs (Horwitz, 1999), the differences between the genders influencing beliefs (Tercanlioglu, 2005), etc.

Students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language are one of the basic factors which influence the learning success. Their significance was recognised by foreign language teachers, and numerous research have emphasised different aspects of their considerably significant role in successful mastering of a foreign language.

Victori and Lockhart (1995, p. 224), in the context of foreign language learning, define beliefs as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning". Horwitz (1988, p. 283) claims that knowing the students' beliefs about a particular language can help teachers to better understand their students "expectations of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their classes". This is so, because the teachers, after gaining insight into the student' attitudes towards a particular language, may eventually undertake the necessary steps to alter the negative attitudes.

Karahan (2007) emphasises the crucial role of attitudes towards foreign language learning, and states that a systematic and planned modification of negative attitudes should be performed, because it is essential that the students on their own feel the need to learn a particular foreign language. Choy and Troudi (2006) state that the feelings and emotions of foreign language learners substantially affect their perceptions and attitudes towards that particular foreign language. The increased level of personal motivation and interest in learning of a particular foreign language would most certainly yield better learning results.

Motivation for language learning is a crucial affective factor influencing the learning success of another or a foreign language, because it is directly associated with the frequency of using learning strategies, desire to learn,

and success. Dörnyei and Otto (1998) define motivation as a state in which an individual has been encouraged by a certain stimulus which initiates, directs, coordinates, increases, mitigates and evaluates cognitive and motor processes, whereby the individual manages or fails to successfully realise personal selected desires. Furthermore, motivation is perceived through a time dimension, which means that it is a dynamic and alterable process.

In addition to individual differences, language learning is also affected by cognitive factors referring to intelligence, language talent and speaker's age (Li & Pan, 2009; Kormos & Csizer, 2010). According to Gardner (1985), motivation is composed of a desire to achieve the aimed progress, invested effort and positive attitudes. Positive attitudes in particular help bridge the gap of initial student—teacher interaction in foreign language learning, which may sometimes be stressful to beginners.

Motivation results from attitudes, and Gardner and Lambert (1972) make a difference between integrative and instrumental motivation, which affects learning achievement. Instrumental motivation refers to a student's desire to learn a new language for utilitarian reasons; learning of a new language will reflect on practical values and well-being. On the other hand, integrative motivation aims at better understanding of cultural values of the target language or assimilation into a society or a wider community (Choosri & Intharaksa, 2011). Such people express a sincere and strong desire to learn a different language and its pertaining culture. Instrumental motivation refers to students who wish to learn a foreign language in order to achieve their practical goals, such as employment or earning money. In today's age, there is a strong cosmopolitan tendency not only among the youth, but among all age groups, for various purposes: education, tourism, professional advancement, hence the need to learn other languages besides one's own. Dörnyei (2005), unlike Gardner and Lambert, believes that the integrative and instrumental function are not mutually exclusive, but rather intertwined. He further stresses the importance of factors associated with the learning process, such as the teacher, teaching materials, teaching methods and teamwork.

Noels (2001) mentioned a different dichotomy, i.e., intrinsic motivation resulting from learning interest and personal satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation which refers to instrumental reasons, such as the belief that learning a new language may help with future employment.

Mihaljević Djigunović (1998) also abandons the dichotomic classification into instrumental and integrative motivation, and makes a difference between the utilitarian-communication type of motivation which in fact refers to instrumental orientation (language used for practical and communication purposes), integrative (desire to be part of a social-cultural group which speaks English as a native tongue), and affective type of motivation associated with emotions emerging with speakers whilst speaking a foreign language. In fact, these are aesthetic and emotional components of English language perception. She also presented two demotivating factors which refer to a negative evaluation of the teacher, teaching materials and teaching methods, and difficulties related to English language learning as a consequence of insufficient previous knowledge or lack of talent.

Liu and Zhang (2013) used a substantially large number of Chinese subjects at several universities to examine attitudes and motivation during English language learning. The results indicated that the subjects who demonstrated a high level of integrative motivation spent more time learning, and adopted the target language much faster with respect to the subjects who had a substantially low level of integrative motivation. This may be connected with the tendency of young Chinese to be more involved in the Western culture, and English as a global language represents the best vehicle for such integration.

Balenović (2011) derived from the assumption that adult learners learn the language for professional reasons, and that globalisation processes affect motivation. The findings indicate that the learners demonstrated the highest degree of the affective-cultural motivation, which is stimulated by the affection towards a particular language and the desire to learn more about a foreign culture. It is followed by the professional and instrumental-technological orientation which refers to the need to learn a language for technical or practical reasons. The least evident is the communication-integrative motivation, which refers to learning stimulated by the need to communicate with the speakers of another language.

Mihaljević Djigunović (1998, 2002) conducted extensive research of the role of motivation in the adoption of a foreign language in Croatia. Mihaljević Djigunović and Bagarić (2007) found statistically significant differences in motivation and attitudes towards language by comparing the subjects' age, where older students show lower level of motivation towards German language learning with respect to younger subjects.

In terms of gender differences, Siebert (2003) found that male more than female students believed that the learning of grammar was the most important part of language learning, and using audio-visual materials was of

utmost importance. Bernat and Lloyd (2007) found that gender differed significantly in only two BALLI items, i.e., women were more likely to perceive multilingualism as a feature of intelligence compared to their male colleagues, and women also enjoyed more talking to native speakers compared to their male counterparts.

Didović Baranac et al. (2016) also discovered statistically significant differences in attitudes and beliefs towards German and Spanish learning with respect to gender and age, where female students demonstrated more positive attitudes with respect to their male colleagues, whereas the same differences were not confirmed for the English language. The authors explained the lack of significant differences in English language learning in the context of globalisation processes and the dominant role of English language. In addition, they emphasised that Croatia has become a very attractive tourist destination, hence the need to raise awareness of learning English and other foreign languages. The authors stated that the motivational aspect towards learning German and Spanish increases with age, i.e., that the highest level occurs before high school graduation when the students find jobs or continue their education.

In the research conducted by Mihaljević Djigunović and Bagarić (2007), the attitudes of English language learners are substantially more positive with respect to German language learners. By comparing English and German language learners at the end of elementary school and high school, the authors discovered that the motivation for learning German decreases with the years of learning, and that the attitudes and motivation of subjects are associated with classes, language status and the level of exposure in extracurricular activities.

Cindrić and Narančić Kovač (2005) believe that the status and conditions of learning are different for different languages. English becomes almost a second language and language of international communication, i.e., worldwide *lingua franca*. New conceptualisations regarding the status of English language might explain the differences in attitudes towards other languages which are compared to English. Also, Mihaljević Djigunović and Geld (2002) emphasise the fact that extracurricular exposure to English, compared to German, plays a crucial role regarding attitudes. Bagarić (2001) claims that language exposure stimulates automatic language production. Also, complaints by German learners refer to learning too long and too difficult texts, and that incomprehensible input can play a vital role in language learning and use. It is also worth noting that in addition to extracurricular activities, the students are extensively exposed to English also at home; on TV and Internet, and are thus more comfortable using it even in class.

Dörneyi, Csizer and Nemeth (2006) point out that English and German became the most important languages taught in Hungary after 1989, but, during the past several decades English has become extremely popular as a global *lingua franca* (McKay, 2003), and languages which had strong regional significance lost a significant amount of importance, such as German with its proximity to Hungary.

In the continuation of the paper, the research methodology, the research results and the conclusion, are presented.

2. Research Aims and Hypotheses

The aim of this research is, based on the questionnaire, to determine similarities and differences in attitudes towards German and Italian in senior-year students of the Catering and Tourist High School. The following hypotheses have been presented:

- 1) The students perceive German as more difficult with respect to Italian.

The attitudes towards Italian are geographically determined. The learners of German will consider German more difficult than Italian because the Dalmatian dialect is rich with Italian words rooted in speech and culture.

- 2) The students will have more positive attitudes towards Italian with respect to German.

The attitudes towards the target language depend on the subjective evaluation of the level of difficulty of a specific language. Italian is a more melodic language, and the visual perception of German may be influential in this evaluation, as its words are rather lengthy in comparison to Italian.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted on a group of 35 senior-year students of German and 35 senior-year students of Italian of the Catering and Tourist High School in Split. The testing tool for the students' attitudes is a questionnaire concerning German and Italian. The questionnaire consists of 30 statements, Table 1, and since two languages are concerned, two versions of the questionnaire have been used.

The subjects expressed their level of agreement with a certain statement by circling answers on a 5-degree Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). After the collection of data, we proceeded with the statistical

analysis. The questionnaire used for this research was compiled according to the questionnaires used for the purpose of examining attitudes towards a foreign language (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998; Boonrangsri et al., 2004; Zainol et al., 2012; Burgos & Perez, 2015).

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) stated that questionnaires are one of the most frequent and reliable methods for collection data in L2 research, because several types of information can be thus collected; factual information, and information about attitudes and behaviours.

Table 1. Statements to be judged along a five-point Likert scale

No.	Statement
1.	I practice German/Italian whenever I have a chance (watching movies without subtitles, talking to foreign speakers).
2.	I feel that others speak German/Italian better than I do.
3.	I like speaking German/Italian in class.
4.	I feel agitated and uncomfortable whilst speaking German/Italian.
5.	I get uncomfortable speaking German/Italian in front of my colleagues.
6.	I am afraid I will be subjected to ridicule whilst speaking German/Italian.
7.	I do not like to participate in classes of German/Italian on my own initiative. I rather stay silent.
8.	I believe that people who speak foreign languages are more educated and have a higher social standing.
9.	Learning of German/Italian helps me meet new people.
10.	Learning of German/Italian is extremely important because it would benefit my professional career.
11.	People will think better of me and my competences if I speak German/Italian well.
12.	I am forced to learn German/Italian.
13.	I can apply my knowledge of German/Italian in my everyday life (in the summertime, talking to foreigners, friends and similar).
14.	German/Italian is too difficult.
15.	It is fun to learn new phrases and German/Italian grammar.
16.	German/Italian textbooks contain phrases and descriptions which are characteristic of our geographical area (e.g., specific Dalmatian meals and beverages, St. Domnius feast, games, names of Mediterranean plants, descriptions of Dalmatian customs and similar).
17.	Good knowledge of German/Italian positively influences my self-esteem.
18.	I rather learn subjects in Croatian.
19.	I am not particularly interested in German/Italian classes.
20.	Learning of German/Italian is a waste of time.
21.	I intend to invest more time into learning German/Italian.
22.	My teacher always helps me with learning German/Italian.
23.	I speak German/Italian well thanks to my teacher.
24.	Active participation of all students is encouraged in German/Italian classes.

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25. Grammar is more prioritised in German/Italian classes, and verbal communication less.
 26. The importance of teamwork is emphasised in German/Italian classes.
 27. German/Italian classes are rich with various and interesting exercises.
 28. German/Italian teaching materials refer to various fields of interest (politics, sport, fashion, food, communication and similar).
 29. I watch my grammatical accuracy whilst speaking German/Italian.
 30. I wish that German/Italian textbooks contained more elements of the Croatian culture.
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4. Research Results

The research results are based on the group of 35 learners of German and 35 learners of Italian. Table 2 illustrates arithmetic means and standard deviations for each of the questions from the questionnaire. Since the arithmetic means for both languages in statements 8, 9, 10, 13, 28 and 30 do not surpass 2.5, it can be concluded that the students agree with said statements regardless of the language. The agreement with statements 8, 9 and 10 implies that the students are aware that the knowledge of foreign languages ensures better social status, a more successful socialisation and benefit in the professional career. The students believe that Italian and German language textbooks contain phrases and descriptions characteristic of a specific area. The agreement with statements 28 and 30 indicates that the students are satisfied with the variety of the content in teaching materials, but they nevertheless would like more elements of their domicile culture in said materials. This may be due to their need to find a similar association between their language and a new language, but also because they would like to know how their culture is verbally reflected in a different language. Vickov (2015) uses the example of the English language to conclude that teaching materials should include the Croatian culture as a starting point, not only because it is necessary to know one's own cultural and historic heritage, but also because of the research results from applied linguistics which indicate that children have a longer and better memory of the meaning of those English words whose content they know from their own culture. Students prefer teaching materials with interesting cultural elements, and the teacher is often seen as a factor causing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with teaching. Mihaljević Djigunović and Bagarić (2007) in their research found that creative and stimulating approaches to teaching German were highly prioritised on the wish list of the learners of German.

Since the arithmetic means for both languages in statements 4, 5, 6 and 20 surpass 3.5, it can be concluded that the students disagree with said statements regardless of the language. The disagreement with statements 4, 5 and 6, which refer to affective components, indicate a high level of confidence whilst speaking a foreign language. The affective component includes the students' emotions, liking or disliking something. Kara (2009) claims that positive attitudes lead to positive behaviour towards studying and De Bot et al. (2005) showed that positive attitudes facilitate language learning. The disagreement with statement 20 indicates a high level of awareness about the need to learn foreign languages.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for the statements from the questionnaire

Statement No.	German language learners		Italian language learners	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1.	3.400	1.288	3.057	1.282
2.	2.314	0.993	2.657	1.327
3.	2.714	1.296	3.000	1.414
4.	3.686	1.183	3.543	1.197
5.	3.857	1.216	3.771	1.262
6.	4.286	1.100	4.086	1.173
7.	3.514	1.380	3.371	1.330

8.	2.000	1.029	2.086	1.147
9.	1.943	1.187	2.143	1.141
10.	1.657	0.998	1.829	1.043
11.	2.914	1.292	2.914	1.245
12.	3.400	1.376	3.714	1.296
13.	2.143	1.240	2.400	1.168
14.	2.914	1.147	3.543	1.400
15.	3.429	1.220	3.400	1.288
16.	3.314	1.367	2.686	1.471
17.	2.829	1.294	2.686	1.278
18.	2.629	1.190	2.514	1.314
19.	2.800	1.208	3.343	1.349
20.	4.257	0.919	3.800	1.346
21.	3.000	1.306	3.057	1.392
22.	1.857	0.944	2.543	1.039
23.	2.714	0.957	3.029	0.954
24.	2.200	1.183	3.029	1.224
25.	2.914	1.095	2.686	0.900
26.	2.943	0.838	3.486	1.121
27.	2.629	1.003	3.143	1.004
28.	2.200	1.023	2.343	1.259
29.	2.657	1.211	2.800	1.106
30.	2.429	1.119	2.343	1.162

An appropriate statistical test provides the answer to the question of whether the results were obtained from the same population, i.e., if the differences are a matter of coincidence, or they in fact appear because the data were obtained by sampling different populations. Considering that the Likert scale is of ordinal type, and two independent samples are compared, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test has been used. Test results are presented in Table 3 (0.05 level of significance). It can be noted that statistically significant differences were obtained among students who learn German and those who learn Italian for statements 14, 22, 24 and 26. The existence of statistically significant differences for statement 14 between German and Italian confirms the first hypothesis; i.e., the students perceive German as more difficult with respect to Italian. Other obtained statistically significant differences (statements 22, 24 and 26) refer to the teacher's role in the learning process. The students recognised active participation in class, and the need for teamwork, as well as the contemporary approach to foreign language teaching as an important factor of motivation in language learning and formation of attitudes. Mihaljević Djigunović (2007) investigates the students' satisfaction with teaching. The results of her study point to the conclusion that students favoured teaching based on the communicative approach, where they could express their own ideas. Also, being exposed to authentic materials such as videos or active participation in teamwork increased their motivation for learning the language. In the study conducted by Mihaljević Djigunović and Bagarić (2007), the learners of German thought that textbook topics were outdated and the tasks were not useful enough.

Since no significant differences were obtained for the remaining statements, it can be concluded that the second hypothesis, according to which the students will have more positive attitudes towards Italian, because they are shaped by the belief that German is much more difficult, has not been confirmed. The students perceive German

as more difficult, however such belief is not reflected negatively on other beliefs about the language. Quite the contrary, the students showed positive attitudes towards German regardless of the fact that, judging from their attitudes, it is more difficult with respect to Italian.

Table 3. Results of Mann-Whitney test for each statement

Mann-Whitney test		U	p value	Significant difference
Statement No.				
1.		517.0	0.252	No
2.		531.5	0.328	No
3.		534.0	0.349	No
4.		570.0	0.612	No
5.		591.0	0.803	No
6.		533.5	0.353	No
7.		569.0	0.608	No
8.		596.0	0.843	No
9.		526.5	0.287	No
10.		546.0	0.392	No
11.		610.5	0.986	No
12.		534.5	0.356	No
13.		519.5	0.259	No
14.		437.0	0.036	Yes
15.		602.0	0.904	No
16.		458.0	0.066	No
17.		573.5	0.643	No
18.		568.0	0.594	No
19.		473.5	0.095	No
20.		509.5	0.225	No
21.		597.5	0.862	No
22.		386.5	0.006	Yes
23.		503.0	0.160	No
24.		389.5	0.007	Yes
25.		546.0	0.399	No
26.		441.0	0.034	Yes
27.		469.0	0.071	No
28.		595.0	0.834	No
29.		561.5	0.540	No
30.		581.5	0.709	No

5. Conclusion

The results obtained from the conducted research indicate that the learners of the German and Italian language exhibit a strong desire to learn both languages aiming to communicate within the target language community in order to achieve the practical goals, such as employment, earning money and similar.

In addition, learners of both languages showed a high degree of agreement with the statement that teaching materials are miscellaneous, but would nevertheless wish that they contained more elements of the domicile culture. For the learners of Italian, this may be due to the geographical and historic proximity of Italy and its

influence on Dalmatia; for German learners, it may be due to the ever-increasing influence of the ongoing “brain drain” oriented towards German speaking countries which is caused by the social and economic conditions in Croatia. The results also indicate a high level of confidence whilst speaking both languages and a high level of awareness about the need to learn foreign languages.

A statistically significant difference between the learners of German and the learners of Italian has been confirmed; the learners of German perceive the language as more difficult than Italian. However, such subjective evaluation does not have an adverse effect on the attitudes towards German. Other statistically significant differences refer to the teacher’s role in the learning process.

The learners of both languages are relatively neutral with regard to the statement that grammar is prioritised in learning, instead of verbal competence. In addition, the agreement with the necessity of grammatical accuracy as a pre-requisite for the development of verbal competence has not been confirmed.

As no significant differences were obtained for the remaining statements, we can conclude that the second hypothesis has not been confirmed, i.e., the subjective perception about the difficulty of the German language did not have an adverse effect on the attitudes towards that language.

It should be emphasised that this research was conducted only on the group of subjects who are graduating from the tourist programme, hence it would be useful to examine whether the obtained results apply to other programmes as well.

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