Foreign Language Teaching Methodology

ATTITUDES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS TOWARDS GERMANS PRELIMINARY COMMUNICATION ON EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Summary – The paper describes an investigation into the attitudes of students towards Germans in two primary schools in the region of Hrvatsko Zagorje. The research was conducted as part of the project Developing intercultural competence in primary foreign language teaching. The sample consisted of 259 students attending grades 5 to 8 who learned German as their first foreign language. Three elements of student attitudes were established - curiosity, closedness towards others and tendency towards prejudice. The research showed that students attending the 5th grade are less prone to stereotyping than other students included the research. Besides, it was found out that a longer period of German language learning does not significantly influence the reduction of prejudice towards native speakers.

Key words: German as a foreign language, intercultural competence, attitudes, prejudices

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, interculturality is a very important dimension of education, its aim being to improve relationships, mutual understanding and respect among members of different cultural and social groups. Thus developing intercultural competence has become one of the central aims of education. A permanent emphasis of the importance of intercultural competence in the life of every individual becomes obvious as soon as we observe the culturally heterogeneous societies we live in and their features, such as global economy, connecting people and institu-

tions around the world and migrations occurring due to economic, demographic or social reasons. Developing intercultural competence as an aim of education does not refer to any particular school subject, although foreign language teaching has a central role in its development.

Intercultural education sets numerous new functions and tasks on schools. The fact that there is no standardized and unequivocal definition of intercultural competence or its elements makes their tasks even more difficult. How can we, as teachers, know whether we have met our aim and developed in our students a certain degree of intercultural competence? Some foreign experts suggest ways of assessing intercultural competence (Byram, 1997), but instruments for its assessment have not yet been developed in Croatia.

Imahori and Lanigan (1989) distinguish among three dimensions of intercultural communicative competence: knowledge, motivation and skills, where by motivation they refer to attitudes. Zarate (1997) distinguishes four dimensions of intercultural competence: knowledge (1), skills (2), attitudes and values (3) and behaviour (4). Andraka and Petravić (2007) mention six components of intercultural competence at primary school age: factual knowledge about foreign countries and cultures and the ability to compare one's own and other cultures, the awareness of the patterns of one's own perception as well as the awareness about others, the wish to understand the other and the different, the awareness of the existence of prejudice, the awareness of possible misunderstandings and the awareness of the existence of different linguistic codes and culturally conditioned meanings in communication. In his model of intercultural competence, Byram (1997) mentions five factors which make up intercultural communicative competence. The first factor is knowing oneself, or the knowledge about individual and social interaction. The second factor follows the first one and represents education, including political education and critical cultural awareness. Attitudes are the third factor, representing a relativization of oneself and the perception of the importance of respect for others. The last factor comprises skills, which, for Byram, can be divided into two groups: the skills of interpretation and establishing relationships between aspects of the two cultures and the skills of discovery and/or interaction.

Attitudes towards people we perceive as different in respect of their beliefs, behaviours and cultural meanings which are implicitly shown through their interaction with other social groups, are frequently characterized as prejudice or stereotype. Such attitudes, whether negative or positive, often create unsuccessful communication (Byram, 1997).

Attitudes as a pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction not only need to be positive, since even positive prejudice can lead to misunderstandings, but also need to express curiosity and openness, as well as the readiness to overcome prejudice and respect to others' beliefs and behaviours. There also needs to be a willingness to analyse one's own culture from the viewpoint of the others

with whom one is engaging and to suspend belief in one's own beliefs and behaviours (Byram 1997).

Intercultural education frequently includes the term tolerance. As early as in the first grade of primary school teachers should develop students' intercultural competence in the following way: „By linking language with cultural contents students should be encouraged to communicate properly in intercultural situations: students should be sensitized to notice cultural similarities and differences as a basis to develop openness, tolerance and empathy towards the other and the different (…)" (NPIP, 2006, p. 119).

Although there is no unequivocal definition of intercultural competence and its elements, there is a consensus about the importance of attitudes. In Croatia, research into attitudes has been mainly limited to investigating prejudice towards a particular social or ethnic group. This investigation into attitudes is an attempt to research not only the tendency towards stereotyping, but also curiosity and openness towards a different ethnic group.

One of the aims of the scientific project *Developing intercultural competence in primary foreign language teaching* is to investigate students' intercultural competence in Croatian primary schools. The starting point for developing an instrument for the evaluation of intercultural competence were students' attitudes towards the other and the different as one of the components of intercultural competence. It was our aim to investigate the attitudes of students attending higher grades of primary school (grades 5 - 8) towards Germans. The students' gender, age and the number of years of learning were taken into consideration. It was also tested whether students' attitudes differ in relation to the mentioned independent variables. The research was limited to a segment of German language speakers for some reasons: The project focuses on developing intercultural competence as part of German language teaching in Croatian primary schools, i.e. on the knowledge, attitudes and skills that students acquire through culture-related topics. Due to the greatest share of Germans and Germany in primary school German textbooks it was our assumption that the age group included in the research would most frequently connect the German language to Germans and would have developed certain attitudes based on their German learning experience in school. This part of the research focused exclusively on students' attitudes, whereas the next stage of the research will investigate other components of intercultural competence and will comprise all German-speaking countries. This instrument will be developed in accordance with the general principles as suggested by the abovementioned experts and will investigate three components of intercultural competence - knowledge, attitudes and skills. The instrument will be adapted to the cultural, social and educational situation in the Republic of Croatia.

The following hypotheses were formulated: students attending higher grades of primary school will express different attitudes in comparison with lower grade students and will show greater openness towards Germans due to their more sub-

stantial knowledge about German culture; students who have been learning German for a longer period of time will display different attitudes towards Germans in comparison with students who have been learning it for a shorter period of time in that they will be more open to a culture they relate to Germans. Because of the culture-related contents they have become acquainted in school older students are expected to have reached a higher level of intercultural competence.

THE METHOD

The sample

The sample was a convenience sample. It comprised 259 students attending grades 5 to 8 who learned German as their first foreign language in two primary schools in the Croatian region of Hrvatsko Zagorje: the *Ljudevit Gaj* Primary School in Krapina and the *Janko Leskovar* Primary School in Pregrada. The sample comprised 129 male and 130 female students. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants with relation to the grade they attend and the number of years they have been learning German as a foreign language. The two schools were selected for this investigation due to the successful cooperation of the author with both the employees of the schools and the parents.

It is necessary to point out that some students started leaning German in the first grade, as their first foreign language, whereas others started learning it in the fourth or fifth grade as an elective subject. Thus, a situation where students attending the same grade have learned German for a different number of years is possible.

Table 1. The number of participants with relation to the grade they attend and to the number of years they have been learning German as a foreign language

GRADE	How long have you been learning German?				
	2	**3**	**4**	**5**	**TOTAL**
5.	27	0	0	63	98
6.	24	24	0	0	48
7.	0	0	45	0	45
8.	0	0	18	58	76
TOTAL	51	24	63	121	259

The Instruments

Statements about Germans previously made by students were collected and used to design a Likert Scale, containing 25 items. Seven items represented a modified Bogardus Social Distance Scale. Those seven items were analysed separately. The remaining 18 items were expected to be saturated with two factors - curiosity and openness towards others (1) and tendency towards prejudice (2).

The procedure

The survey was anonymous and was carried out by teachers of German during German lessons and took about 20 minutes. The students were asked to circle their level of agreement with a number of statements on a scale from 1 to 5. Here are a few examples of the statements used:

–   *I am interested in what my German peers do in their free time.*
–   *The Germans are very hard-working.*
–   *I wouldn't like to talk to a foreigner who speaks German.*
–   *The Germans have no taste in dressing.*

It is necessary to point out that the items were not determined randomly but were obtained in a previous survey which included 98 students attending grades 5-8 of primary school. The students' task was to write down what they associate to Germany and the Germans. The questionnaire was constructed according to the statements which appeared most frequently.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results were processed by means of the SPSS statistical software for Windows. The results obtained from the modified Bogardus Social Distance Scale were entered and processed separately. Factor analysis was used for the remaining eighteen items, which, after isolating six items, resulted in three factors: curiosity, closedness towards others and tendency towards prejudice. Principal component analysis and varimax rotation were used.

Table 2. Factor analysis results

ITEMS	FACTORS		
	Curiosity	**Zatvorenost**	**Prejudice**
I am interested in what my German peers do in their free time.	,756		
I would like to have pen friends who speak German.	,752		
I am interested in what my German peers learn at school.	,697		
I would like to travel to a German-speaking country.	,551	-,334	
To me Germans represent the enemy.		,668	
I wouldn't like to speak to a foreigner who speaks German.		,663	
For me Germans are strangers and I wouldn't like to be friends with them.		,617	
Nijemci voze dobre automobile.			,697
Nijemci su bogati.			,546
Nijemci su većinom plavokosi.			,531
Nijemci vole piti pivo.			,507

Table 3. Arithmetic means and standard deviations for obtained factors

	M	SD
Curiosity	3,9035	,92045
Zatvorenost	1,9163	,85883
Prejudice	3,5042	,56823

Table 3 shows the arithmetic means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for each particular factor obtained by factor analysis. When observing students' tendency towards prejudice it can be noticed that its average value of 3.5 is relatively high. The most frequent prejudices towards Germans are the following:

Table 4. Tendency towards prejudice

	Germans like drinking beer.	Germans drive good cars.	Germans are rich.	Germans are mostly fair-haired.
N	259	259	259	259
M	4,30	4,24	3,85	3,15
Mod	5	5	4	3

(N – number of participants)

The table shows the average values for each particular statement. A very high average value can be observed for the statements describing the Germans as beer lovers and drivers of good cars. Those results are probably related to the fact that the students are acquainted with the festival of *Oktoberfest* and with the German car industry.

The next step was to perform a one-way variance analysis for each particular independent variable. Table 5 shows the results of variance analysis, gender being the independent variable. There is no statistically significant difference between male and female students regarding their tendency towards prejudice.

Table 5. Variance analysis results with gender as an independent variable

Gender	M	SD	F-RATIO	df	P
Male	3,5550	,56138			
Female	3,4538	,57265	2,062	1	0,152
Total	3,5042	,56823			

(M=mean, SD=standard deviation, df= degrees of freedom, P = statistical significance)

The following step was to perform a variance analysis, with the grade being the independent variable. Table 6 shows a statistically relevant difference in the tendency towards prejudice with regard to the grade students attend.

Table 6. Tendency towards prejudice in different grades

Grade	M	SD	F-RATIO	df	P
5	3,2733	,62778			
6	3,6542	,46811			
7	3,5822	,49142	8,39	3	0,00
8	3,6368	,51403			
Total	3,5042	,56823			

The tendency towards prejudice is considerably lower in the fifth grade in comparison with the other grades. After having conducted a variance analysis which compared the tendency towards prejudice with regard to the grade students attend, a statistically relevant difference between fifth-graders and students attending other grades can be observed. However, since there is no statistically relevant difference in the tendency towards prejudice between sixth- seventh- and eighth-graders it can be concluded that the tendency towards prejudice increases on completion of the 5th grade and mainly stays unchanged later. This can be connected with the fact that children possess a certain amount of openness towards the world until they reach a certain age, or, what Leopold-Mudrack calls "*Weltoffenheit*" (1998, p.65). Leopold-Mudrack maintains that children do not have a rigid system of values and attitudes until the age of ten. It is acquired later through socialization in their own culture. This means that children's attitudes towards foreigners and their cultures will be positive or at least neutral. Later, children accept norms of behaviour from their own social environment, i.e. their native country and become less open towards the other and the different. An investigation carried out by Mihaljević-Djigunović in 1994 (Mihaljević-Djigunović, 1995) on a sample of 284 students attending the 4th grade of primary school showed that a very small percentage of children had negative attitudes towards native speakers of the foreign language they learned at school. Thus 1.0% of the children who learned German had negative attitudes towards native speakers of German whereas 30.3% had neutral attitudes and no less than 68.7% had positive attitudes.

Table 7. Variance analysis results with relation to the grade students attend and to the tendency towards prejudice

Grade		P
5	6	0,002
	7	0,024
	8	0,001
6	5	0,002
	7	0,939
	8	0,999

Grade		P
7	5	0,024
	6	0,939
	8	0,963
8	5	0,001
	6	0,999
	7	0,963

As already mentioned earlier, not all the fifth-graders who took part in this investigation had been learning German for the same period of time. Of the 90 fifth-graders in our sample 27 had been learning German for two years, whereas 63 of them had been learning it for five years. When comparing fifth-graders according to their tendency towards prejudice it can be observed that there is no statistically relevant difference between the two groups. It can be concluded that a longer period of foreign language learning in school does not affect the reduction of prejudices towards members of the target language cultures.

Table 8. Tendency towards prejudice with relation to the grade students attend and to the number of years they have been learning German as a foreign language

Grade	How long have you been learning German?	M	SD	N	F-RATIO	P
5	2	3,2370	,74841	27		
	5	3,2889	,57449	63		
6	2	3,5583	,39112	24		
	3	3,7500	,52503	24	0,742	0,528
7	4	3,5822	,49142	45		
8	4	3,7222	,54076	18		
	5	3,6103	,50738	58		

CONCLUSION

Research results lead to the conclusion that the tendency towards prejudice is closely connected to the age of the students. However, this investigation cannot confirm the extent to which the cultural content covered in the foreign language classroom contributes to developing students' attitudes. A more extensive investigation on students' intercultural competence is planned which will comprise students in the fourth and seventh grade. It will be carried out in three steps. First,

an instrument for the evaluation of intercultural competence will be used to investigate students' knowledge, attitudes and skills in the experimental and control group. In the second stage, during their German language classes students in the experimental group will become acquainted with cultural contents whose aim is developing openness and curiosity and reducing prejudice towards native speakers of German and their cultures. The control group will deal only with topics which are part of the curriculum. After having dealt with the mentioned teaching contents, the investigation will be repeated with both groups and the results will be compared.

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