

THE NECESSITY TO CHANGE THE APPROACH TO THE TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TAUGHT AS A SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN SLOVAK SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT: Currently, most Slovak elementary and secondary schools teach English as the first foreign language and German, French, Spanish, Italian, or Russian as the second foreign language. From the results of foreign language School leaving exams, we can see that the number of students learning English is growing, and their language proficiency is continuously improving. The problem appears with a second foreign language, with the opposite tendency. The language proficiency in a second foreign language has been decreasing for a long time. Based on the questionnaire survey results from the professional faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava, we analyzed whether the length of time spent learning a second foreign language contributes to improving the achieved language proficiency. The results are presented in the article. Students of five professional faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava participated in the survey. Based on the results, more than half of the students have been learning a second foreign language for seven to nine years and have reached a language level of Basic User according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The acquired language level is not sufficient, considering the length of teaching/learning, and it does not motivate students to communicate in the given foreign language to learn it more intensively.

KEYWORDS: basic user, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), independent user, language proficiency, language testing, second foreign language

Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly interconnected through globalization, so using and mastering foreign language skills is assuming ever greater importance. English is undoubtedly the main foreign language taught in the European Union (EU), and it is the first foreign language or the language most pupils/students learn during their education. One of the basic features of the EU's language policy is multilingualism. The reason for such a policy is to ensure the possibility of communication with the citizens of individual member states in their official languages. On the other hand, the EU requires member states to devote themselves to the language education of citizens so that in addition to their native language, citizens master two other foreign languages (declared trilingualism – native + 2 foreign languages). Individual member states are looking for ways to teach foreign languages to fulfill the EU's language aim. The practice is heterogeneous. So far, the member states have pragmatically agreed more or less on the first foreign language, English, which is how they have oriented their educational systems. Though the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland left the EU, English remained official. The working language of the EU institutions is currently the dominant communication language, even though there is no longer a member state in the EU that has English listed as an official language (Regulation No 1, 1958).¹

¹ Join the EU, each country decides which language to use as the EU's official language. Only the United

According to the International Standard Classification of Education, the Slovak education system is organized into subsequent levels (UIS, 2012, p. 22). Early childhood education (ISCED 0) includes children from three to six years old; it is pre-school training. Elementary education (ISCED 1 – Primary education and ISCED 2 – Lower secondary education) includes the education of pupils aged six to fifteen. Primary and Lower secondary education in Slovakia occurs within elementary schools (ZŠ). In secondary schools (SŠ) – (Upper secondary education – ISCED 3), students are educated from fifteen to nineteen years old, in some cases also from fifteen to sixteen, because compulsory school attendance in Slovakia lasts ten years (pupils from 6 to 16 years old). Pupils finish it either by completing the first year of Upper secondary education or by reaching the age of sixteen. Elementary (Primary and Lower secondary education) is a nine-year unified system, of which Primary education lasts 5 years, and lower secondary education lasts 4 years (Štátny vzdelávací program pre základné vzdelávanie, 2023). Pupils start their compulsory school attendance at the age of six. Upper secondary education is from age fifteen, and its organizational structure is divided into general, professional, sports, and artistic education. General four-year and five-year secondary schools or eight-year grammar schools (for students aged 11-19) provide general Upper secondary education.

As part of the described institutional education, foreign language education also occurs. In 1989, the dominant position of the Russian language was cancelled, and other foreign languages –

English, German, French, Spanish, and Italian – were taught as the first foreign language in schools, which until then were only taught as the second foreign language. The situation changed in 2011, when English became the first compulsory foreign language, and other foreign languages were again taught as the second language, and their teaching was optional. By amendment of Act 245/2008 Coll., this status no longer applies. Starting from the 2019/2020 school year, pupils can choose a different foreign language as their first. However, it still applies that if the pupil does not select English as the first foreign language, he must select it as the second foreign language in the seventh grade of elementary school. Currently, the first foreign language, most often English, is taught from the third grade of elementary school; very often, schools offer it from the first grade, and many pupils already encountered it in Early childhood education. The second foreign language is taught from the seventh grade of elementary school, but some schools provide it from the fifth or sixth grade. The reason for this is the fact that according to Act 245/2008 Coll., the school must: "enable the student to master the English language and at least one other foreign language..." (Zákon 245/2008 Z. z.). In secondary schools, the differences between the first and the second foreign language are mainly in the number of hours taught per week. The English language is offered by all elementary and secondary schools. Another foreign language, out of five possible, is offered by the schools according to their possibilities. Therefore, it may happen that in secondary school, the student does not continue with the second foreign language from elementary school but starts learning another/third foreign language from the basics or starts learning the second foreign language only in secondary school (Vyhľadávka č. 224/2022, Vyhľadávka č. 221/2024).

While there is a concept of teaching foreign languages to elementary and secondary schools in Slovakia, the teaching of foreign languages in colleges and universities of non-philological studies at all three levels is not unified. University education has three levels – bachelor's (ISCED 6 – Bachelor's or equivalent level), master's (ISCED 7 – Master's or equivalent level) and doctoral (ISCED 8 – Doctoral or equivalent level). Study programs are fully within the competence of universities and colleges. Universities decide on the form and content of foreign language teaching for graduates of Bachelor's (B.Sc.), Master's/Engineering (M.Sc./Ing.) and Doctoral (Ph.D.) degrees. They try to

Kingdom has made English its official language in the EU. English is also one of the official languages of Ireland and Malta, but Ireland has designated Irish as the official language for the EU and Malta has pushed for Maltese.

interconnect professional subjects of study with language education, so they create appropriate teaching materials and look for optimal forms for teaching foreign and foreign professional languages (Kunovská, Kucharová, 2019, p. 13). For this reason, effective methods of teaching (from the perspective of the teacher-educator) and learning (from the perspective of the student-educant) are current topics, especially in university education (Breveníková, Seresová, 2018, p. 13).

The education described here takes place within formal educational institutions and is referred to as formal institutional education. Foreign language education can be completed, supplemented, extended, and improved in a variety of language schools and non-school institutions.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Just as important as acquiring knowledge of a foreign language is knowing how to evaluate and compare this knowledge. It was, therefore, important to develop and adopt a common classification framework. Language certificates are such a framework. They are needed for educational purposes, for work purposes, or, for example, to meet citizenship requirements. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the full name of which is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Learning, Teaching, and Assessment, provides a common basis for the development of foreign language curricula, preparation guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It is used to test language proficiency, especially in educational institutions that provide formal education. It was developed by the Council of Europe and published in 2001 (Council of Europe, 2001). It has a six-level system for indicating language competencies within different productive and receptive skills:

Basic User (A1 and A2),

Independent User (B1 and B2),

Proficient User (C1 and C2).

An update to the CEFR in 2020 has also formalised three ancillary levels – those of A2+, B1+, and B2+ (Council of Europe, 2020). These language levels have yet to gain significant traction in the world of language testing, though this will most probably happen in the future. The CEFR provides a range of theoretical and practical research approaches and a wealth of relevant documentation, guidelines, and other information. According to Trim (2010), the ideas underpinning the development of the CEFR are also part of creating and promulgating a wider notion of a common European multilingual and multicultural identity. The CEFR offers a method for comparing skills in different languages and defines which foreign language skills test takers must master at defined language levels. It has wide application in national and international educational institutions.

In Slovakia, as in other EU Member States, the CEFR is used to assess the foreign language level of pupils and students, especially in formal, institutional education. It applies in the way that a student with a complete Upper secondary education should reach level B1 to C1 in the first foreign language and at least level A2 to B1 in the second foreign language according to the CEFR. As part of institutional education, students in Slovakia can take the school leaving exam in English, German, Russian, French, Spanish, or Italian. In the first foreign language, they must pass the exam at language level B1 to C1. Since the 2011/2012 school year, grammar school students have had to pass the exams

at the B2 level. As of 2017, students of bilingual secondary schools that do not have an international treaty have to pass an exam at the C1 level.²

Most Slovak schools (elementary + secondary) teach English as a first foreign language for 11, 12, or 13 years, and German, French, Spanish, Italian, or Russian as a second foreign language. For a second foreign language, the length of education can vary, ideally lasting 7, 8, or 9 years, but it can be less. The schools offer a second foreign language according to their possibilities; they do not offer the whole range of foreign languages. Based on the results of the school leaving examinations in foreign language, it can be said that the numbers and the level of English language are continuously improving. The problem appears in second foreign languages, where the tendency is the opposite.³ There has been a long-term decrease in interest in learning them, and the level of their knowledge is also decreasing. Therefore, we think that some approaches to teaching second foreign languages need to be changed. We asked whether the length of a second foreign language teaching corresponds to the language level attained. In the answers to the questions asked in the questionnaire, we looked for the causes that most negatively affect the level of proficiency in a second foreign language. We also wanted to know whether students see the benefits of mastering a second foreign language at the B1 level (Independent User) compared to the A1 and A2 levels (Basic User).

Approach to research

In order to get answers to the questions, we conducted a questionnaire survey at the University of Economics in Bratislava (EUBA), which was attended by 437 students from five professional faculties. We asked students directly about their experience of learning their first (English) and second (German) language. The students surveyed were learning English as a first foreign language (some of them not from primary but only from lower secondary education) and German as a second foreign language (we also identified non-standard lengths of learning here). The students who participated in the survey were from the Faculty of Economics and Finance (NHF), which prepares graduates for various positions in economic practice, the Faculty of Business Management (FPM), which prepares graduates for management of all types of businesses, the Faculty of Economic Informatics (FHI), which prepares students to work with all types of social and economic information, the Faculty of International Relations (FMV), which prepares graduates in the field of international relations, international economic relations, economic diplomacy, and the Faculty of Commerce (OF), which prepares graduates of business science disciplines. The numbers of students who participated in the survey for each faculty of the University of Economics are presented in Table 1. After completing the questionnaire, the students took a CEFR language level test in German in order to find out what level of proficiency in the second foreign language they achieved before starting to learn it at the University of Economics. The summary results are presented in Table 2. Students took part in a survey and a language level test in German by faculty in order to better observe common and different features that may influence subsequent second foreign language learning. While the students of all monitored groups continued to study English continuously from the first semester of the first year, the situation varies for German (taught as a second foreign language). FMV students start learning a second foreign language in the first semester and study it for seven semesters. OF students start with a second foreign language in the second semester and learn it for three semesters. NHF, FHI, and FPM students start with German in the third semester and learn it for two semesters, Table 1. The faculties themselves give different weight to

² Information about School leaving exams is available on the website of **the National Institute of Education and Youth** (NIVAM) in School leaving exams, <https://www2.nucem.sk/sk/merania/narodne-merania/maturita>.

³ The data can be obtained on the website of the **National Institute of Education and Youth** (NIVAM) and the Slovak Scientific and Technical Information Centre (CVTI SR).

the languages taught as second foreign languages, depending on the expected future use in a given profession. FMV has a specific position; students learn three foreign languages as the faculty prepares graduates for international activities. Students begin studying their first and second foreign language in the first semester of their studies. The first foreign language has a higher entry-level (B1, B2, C1), and the study at the faculty is oriented toward a professional language. The course lasts five semesters. The second foreign language assumes a lower entry-level (A1, A2, B1), so teaching in the first two semesters is mainly focused on improving the level of the general language. A professional foreign language follows from the third semester. The second foreign language takes a total of seven semesters. At FMV, students not only learn a second foreign language for most semesters but also have their weekly hours doubled in the first semester. FMV students start learning a third foreign language in the seventh semester (of their Master's study). The teaching of foreign languages at the OF, NHF, FHI, and FPM, unlike at the FMV, is focused on both the first and the second foreign language in the professional language; the teaching of the second foreign language at these faculties does not start from the first semester, there is no continuity and we assume that this fact also has an impact on the language proficiency in the second foreign language and what is more, students start with a professional foreign language at the language level they have acquired in secondary school, in most cases at A2, A1 level, which was 365 students out of 437 students (not counting 34 FMV students who start a second foreign language in the first semester and the teaching is mainly aimed at improving proficiency of general language).

In general, the aim of the questionnaire survey was not only to know the students' experiences with institutional, formal education in the first and second foreign language from elementary to secondary school but also to find out the level of language proficiency in the second foreign language before the students start learning it at the University of Economics. At the same time, we were interested in how students use the second foreign language

University of Economics in Bratislava (EUBA)	Number of students	Number of foreign languages	Number of semesters of German	English from semester	German from semester
Faculty of International Relations (FMV)	34	3	7	the first	the first
Faculty of Economics and Finance (NHF)	70	2	2	the first	the third
Faculty of Commerce (OF)	155	2	3	the first	the second
Faculty of Economic Informatics (FHI)	93	2	2	the first	the third
Faculty of Business Management (FPM)	85	2	2	the first	the third

Table 1: Faculties and numbers of students who participated in the survey,

(Source: Survey)

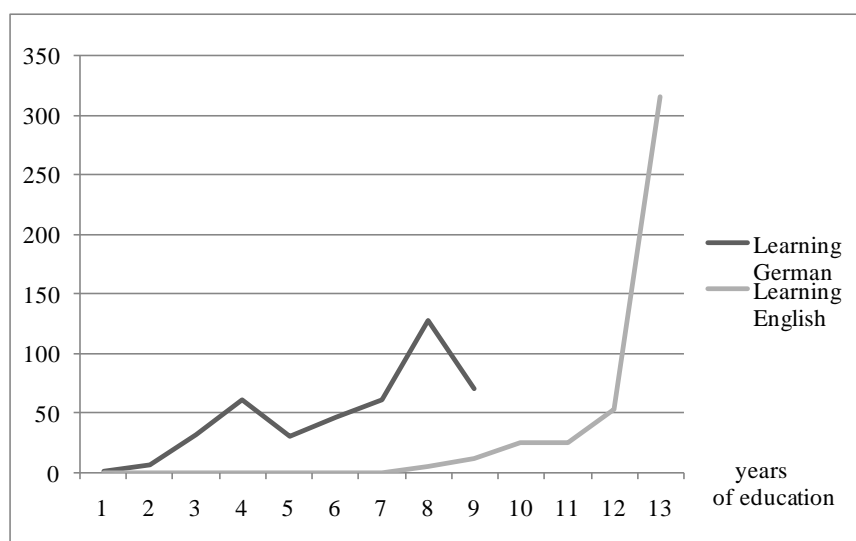
Results and discussion

The results of the survey are presented in Table 2 and Graph 1. They include the number of students for each faculty of the University of Economics, the language level achieved in the first and second foreign language, the length of time spent learning the foreign language, the number of students who had continuous education, the number of students who had only institutional education of the foreign language (at school), and the number of students who learned the foreign language outside of school. Formal, institutional education in a second foreign language should last 7, a maximum of 9 years, with a minimum of 4 years, which is the length of study at secondary school. If a student has been learning a second foreign language for less than 4 years, this is a non-standard case. There were 40 such students, of whom 16 students on the test achieved language level A2 and 24 A1, according to the CEFR. From eight to nine years, 17 students have been learning English, and all of them have reached B1 level or above. For the same number of years (eight to nine), 199 students have been learning German, and 170 of them have reached language levels A1 and A2. Here, the impact of fewer lessons for a second foreign language for the same number of years of education was particularly evident. For students who had been non-standard second language learners for less than four years, the organization of second language education at the schools they attended was negatively affected. The majority of these students had just had a second foreign language other than German at secondary school. In fact, they had started to learn a third foreign language in secondary school, but at university, they continued with the second foreign language they had learned during elementary school (Lower secondary education).

We pointed out that there are cases when the length of second language learning does not correspond to the expected language level. 9.15% (40) of students reached the language level A1 and A2 in less than 4 years, and 80.1% (350) of students reached the same language level in 4 to 9 years. 69.3% (i.e., 303) students achieved A2, B1, or C1 levels. 72.3% (316) of the students had been learning English for 13 years, 12.4% (54) of the students had been learning English for 12 years, and 394 students had been learning English continuously, which is 90.2% of the total number of students. The German language was studied for 9 years by 71 students; 128 students studied for 8 years, 61 students studied for 7 years, and 397 students studied for 4 to 9 years. Of all the students in German, only 8.5% achieved language level B1, 58.6% achieved language level A2, and 30.7% achieved language level A1. The language proficiency achieved in the second foreign language, considering the length of education, is insufficient; the language levels A1 and A2 indicate a Basic User. Users with this language proficiency do not communicate in this language in most cases or even avoid communication and switch to English if possible. Some type of discontinuity in the education of a second foreign language was present in 94.1% of the students, but the organization of German language teaching at the University of Economics has already contributed to this situation. Only 15.3% of the students supplemented their knowledge of the German language outside the school, in contrast to the English language, where it was up to 83.5% of the students.

University of Economics in Bratislava	FMV	NHF	OF	FHI	FPM
Number of students	34	70	155	93	85
The first foreign language - English	34	70	155	93	85
School leaving exam on level B1	5	15	37	23	29
School leaving exam on level B2	21	47	104	55	49
School leaving exam on level C1	8	8	15	15	7
Number of years of education	9 - 13	9 - 13	8 - 13	9 - 13	8 - 13
Continuous education	31	62	141	82	78
Discontinuity	3	8	14	11	7
Education in addition to school	28	62	125	81	69
The second foreign language - German	34	70	155	93	85
language level A1	5	16	55	30	28
language level A2	20	49	82	55	50
language level B1	5	5	15	7	5
language level B2	3	0	3	1	2
language level C1	1	0	0	0	0
Number of years of education	3 - 9	2 - 9	2 - 9	2 - 9	1 - 9
Continuous education	26	0	0	0	0
Discontinuity	8	70	155	93	85
Education in addition to school	9	10	28	12	8

Table 2: Information about students from professional faculties of the University of Economics
(Source: Survey)



Graf 1: Students studied English and German for a given number of years
(Source: Survey)

What are the main reasons for this situation? Today, the English language is of great importance. Geopolitics also strongly influences language policy. This is one of the main reasons why

English is now acting as a global language, the new lingua franca (ELF – English as a Lingua Franca) in the world's global communication. English is used in science, tourism, international academic programs and institutions, computers, social networking, and many other areas. Proficiency in English is not just an advantage but a necessity, and the more skilled work a university graduate wants to do, the more important it is to be able to speak English at the best possible level. Therefore, students behave pragmatically. Professionals in all fields who are proficient in English benefit from access to international databases. Students at the University of Economics are also aware of this situation and place great importance on learning English with a focus on their future jobs, which the university is preparing them for. Unlike other foreign languages, English receives a lot of support in informal settings. Students are engaged in it not only in school but also outside. This is also evident from Table 2, where out of 437 students, 83.5% of the students studied English outside school, and only 15.3% of the students studied German, even though it is the second most taught foreign language in Slovak schools.

It may also be due to the approach used to teach a second foreign language. In Slovakia, foreign language teaching is approached additively and successively. Pupils start with their first foreign language from the first to the third grade of elementary school and with the second foreign language from the fifth to the seventh grade of elementary school. Even in most EU countries, foreign languages are taught separately from each other (García, 2014, p. 93). According to Janík (2017), languages are used flexibly in practice. Therefore, the policy of language separation, as well as the belief that only the target language should be used when teaching the target language, is often criticized. The process of learning a foreign language is also connected with the requirement for knowledge of foreign languages. In general, it is assumed that a student who has already learned/is learning a first foreign language should have the ability to use the knowledge of the already learned language and learning processes when learning another foreign language. In other words, a student learning a foreign language should learn not only to use the foreign language but also to use the knowledge gained by learning a foreign language when learning another foreign language. He should learn to be aware of the process of acquiring a foreign language and create a so-called procedural knowledge, which he can then use even after finishing school if he wants to learn another foreign language or improve his already mastered foreign language. It is difficult to recognize whether students, especially in secondary school, have developed such procedural knowledge. The achieved language proficiency of the Basic User confirms the opposite. Students do not communicate and, if possible, prefer to communicate in English, in which they reach a higher language proficiency – Independent User or Proficient User.

Conclusion

In the article, we wanted to point out that the language proficiency reached in the second foreign language is not adequate for the length of its teaching/learning and that a change will be needed in the teaching of second foreign languages. German was selected as the benchmark for the second foreign language, which is still the most frequently taught second foreign language in Slovak elementary and secondary schools. As the results of the students of professional faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava show, various factors have an impact on the given situation, for example, less motivation of students to learn a second foreign language, the organization of teaching a second foreign language at elementary and/or secondary schools, less interest in supplementing knowledge outside of school, lower intensity. All this reduces the effectiveness of teaching. As a result, the length of learning a second foreign language does not motivate students, as many, after seven to nine years of learning a second foreign language, have reached language level A2 (38% of students) and language level A1 (13.5%), which according to CEFR is a Basic User. According to our findings, even when

communicating with German-speaking, if possible, students prefer English for communication. For the above reasons, we point to the necessity of a change in the organisation of second foreign language teaching. It is up for discussion whether the teaching of a second foreign language could be shorter but more intensive, with an increased weekly allocation of teaching hours. The effectiveness of teaching a second foreign language could be increased if schools offered a larger range of foreign languages (out of five possible), at least in Upper secondary education (secondary schools). Students in secondary schools could continue with a second foreign language that they started in elementary school. Perhaps the position of a foreign language teacher could be created, who would not be tied to a school and would teach foreign languages, a certain language combination, in different schools.

It is important to continue researching. It would be necessary to carry out the same survey several years in a row or to supplement the research with the results from testing the language level of students after completing language education at the University of Economics. Although the teaching of a second foreign language at the University of Economics is mainly focused on a professional foreign language, testing of students could show whether the learning of a professional language also contributes to an increase in the language proficiency of the general language and increases the motivation to learn a second foreign language. Acquiring proficiency in a professional foreign language can bring with it a greater willingness to use a second foreign language, especially in practice.

A comparison of the language proficiency of FMV students with students of the other four faculties could yield interesting findings. FMV students learn their second foreign language at the university for the longest time, with a larger number of hours, and spend the first two semesters improving their general language. The information gathered could help to show what direction the teaching of second foreign languages at the University of Economics could take. Perhaps the view of language proficiency will change after the implementation of the other three auxiliary language levels – A2+, B1+, and B2+. However, their incorporation will require changes in the preparation of educational and language testing materials, which will not be possible in the near future.

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