

## LEARNING GERMAN AS A SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE: IS GRAMMAR SO DIFFICULT?

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### Abstract

The awareness of the second foreign language has become a necessity nowadays. Therefore, the curricula of non-language higher education institutions include learning two foreign languages where learning English is compulsory and the second foreign language can be chosen by the students. Such languages as German, French or Spanish are the most popular for learning as the second foreign languages. The popularity of German is explained mainly by the opportunity to continue the higher education in a German speaking country or by the prospects of developing carrier.

On the other hand, the students feel anxious on studying German. There is a stereotype that the grammar structure of this language is very complicated and can cause many difficulties especially when Russian learners have some awareness and communicative skills of the English language.

Various aspects of English-German interference in phonetics and lexis were already studied by the authors ("First Steps in Learning German: Phonetics and Rules of Reading" - International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts SGEM 2017, Conference Proceedings, Volume I Language and Linguistics, Health Policy and Services, 28-31 March, 2017, Vienna, Austria, pp. 73-77. "First Steps in Learning German: How to Learn Lexis" - Proceedings of EDULEARN17 Conference 3th-5th July 2017, Barcelona, Spain, pp. 9554-9556). This paper focuses on the issues of learning grammar in German. It analyses different grammar phenomena and their correlation with the students' native and the first foreign languages.

The authors examine the practical experience of teaching German as a second foreign language at the Institute of Law at the RUDN University (Peoples' Friendship University of Russia). They generalize the results of the survey held among the lawyers-to-be. The recommendations on the more efficient development of the use of German grammar are put forward

**Keywords:** teaching German as a second foreign language; linguistic interference, teaching grammar.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of learning several foreign languages has become evident nowadays. Many young people start learning the first and second foreign languages at regular or high schools, as it is mandatory due to the Russian educational standards. The majority of regular schools teach English as the first foreign language.

However not all schools can afford teaching second foreign languages. In this case, school graduates start learning the second foreign language when they enter the higher educational institution. The students choose the second foreign language among the variety of languages offered by the university and the department where the students are trained for their profession. There are several reasons why the students choose a specific language for learning. They were already presented by the authors in their previous works (Belenkova, Kruse, 2017 a and b).

The opposite opinion namely, why the students do not intend to study German as a second foreign language might be worth learning. In fact, various surveys concentrated on getting the opinions of the students and the university teaching staff is held at the RUDN University quite often (Atabekova, 2017). Therefore, it was quite natural, to explore the students' standpoint on the issue connected with the educational matters. As far as the foreign language is concerned, the findings of the survey indicated that in 2016, 57% of the first year students chose not German but French or Spanish for learning. In 2017, the number of such students increased to 87%. Consequently, one of the tasks was to be aware of the reasons of the students' negative attitude to learning German.

## **2. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

To realize the task of the educational experiment an open-ended survey was held among the first year students who entered the Law Institute of the RUDN University in 2017. The students were to respond to the following issues:

What language did you choose to study as a second foreign language?

Name the reasons why you did not choose one of the other languages (French, German or Spanish).

Totally 228 respondents participated in the survey. Only 30 students expressed their intention to study German as a second foreign language. Consequently, 198 respondents showed their negative opinion to learning this language. The overwhelming minority, namely, 24 students (that makes 12%) expressed the more or less objective arguments against learning German. Half of the students (6%) travelled to Spain or France, got interested in the cultural and historical background of the countries and wanted to learn the Spanish or French languages. The other half of the learners (6%) chose the second foreign languages following the parents' advice.

The next step of the experiment was to specify the reasons of the other 176 students. For this purpose, this number of the survey participants was considered as 100%. The output of the survey showed three main reasons of the students' negative attitude to the German language. First, 13% (23 respondents) learnt this language at the regular secondary and high school, passed international language exams and got the international language certificate proving their high proficiency level. Apparently, these students started learning French or Spanish as a second language from the very beginning.

The same quantity of the respondents (23) that makes the other 13% are sure that the German language is not widely spread in the international environment as only few countries speak this language. However, the formal data prove that this opinion is false. The Wikipedia site shows that German is "the second most spoken native language in Europe after Russian (with 144 million speakers), above French (with 66.5 million) and English (with 64.2 million)" ([en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)). Moreover in some European countries German being not a formal language of the country is spoken by the population of the local communities.

The greatest part of the respondents – 74% (130 students) had a disappointing personal experience of learning German at the school level or was dissuaded by their relatives' negative opinions from learning German as the second foreign language. Among the arguments in favour of their standpoint, the students mentioned the way of pronouncing sounds in German that seemed to be not pleasant. 26 students i.e. one fifth of the respondents from this group indicated this reason. 115 participants of the survey insisted on the extreme complexity of the German grammar for learning and further usage. The output of the survey showed that some students mentioned two reasons.

Another survey was held among the students that started learning German as a second foreign language and who had A2-B1 levels of proficiency in English. Such surveys were held at the end of the academic years within the same students groups learning for a bachelor degree in law. The experiment lasted for four years that gave the researchers the opportunity to follow how the students' opinions changed from year to year.

The students should classify the grammar phenomena of the German language from the least to the most difficult. Some students mentioned several issues so the total findings do not equal 100%. The findings of

the survey are presented in the table:

Table 1. Grammar difficulties in German from the Russian students' point of view

Grammar issues	Years of learning			
	1	2	3	4
Changes of the grammar forms of the definite articles before nouns	44%	35%	32%	28%
Changes of the adjective endings before nouns		48%	44%	40%
The use of the prepositions in the dative and accusative cases	54%	52%	52%	49%
The use of the auxiliary verbs "haben" and "sein" to form the Past Perfekt Tense		54%	50%	50%
The use of the forms "Partizip II" as an attribute		64%	62%	59%
Subordinate clauses and their structure	72%	69%	67%	64%

The data of the experiment proved that the most difficulties in studying German grammar are observed in syntax. Some grammar phenomena do not cause any problems at the initial level of studying the German language but then the learners realize the complexity of the issues and indicate them as difficult starting from the second year. The perception of the complexity level decreases but not greatly. The discrepancy varies from 4% (the use of the auxiliary verbs "haben" and "sein") to 16% (Grammar changes of the definite articles before nouns). In the last case, we can suppose that the students got the awareness of this grammar phenomenon and succeeded in its correct usage in speech.

As the grammar systems of the native (Russian) and of the English languages differ greatly from the German grammar, it is important to understand the mentality of the people speaking the language and to get the "philosophy of the language" (Brinitzer, et al.).

To overcome the negative effect of the interlinguistic interference special exercises and assignments are used. The difference in the use of the dative and accusative cases is learnt in motion. The students are asked to go to the staircase ("Wir gehen auf die Treppe" here the accusative case is used) and go up the staircase ("Wir gehen auf der Treppe nach oben" here the dative case is used). The similar comparison can be observed when the students obey the orders "Gehen Sie an die Wand" ("Go to the wall") and "Gehen an der Wand entlang" ("Go along the wall"). The cognitive memory (the awareness of grammar rules) is overlapped with the motor/ kinesthetic memory (the memory of actions and movement). In such situations, the use of grammar is learnt not mechanically but in association with real practice. The authors' teaching experience shows that after such activities most students remember the fact that when crossing the border of a room, the accusative case is used, and when moving inside the room, the dative case is used.

Learning the rules by heart is not enough for their correct use in written or oral utterances. To provide the efficient development of grammar skills the various educational technologies can be used, they are:

- acting out mini dialogues with the grammar issues under study in various situations;
- the use of multi-coloured cards related to the feminine (red), masculine (blue) and neutral (green) gender;
- different parts of speech are presented in various geometric shapes e.g. a verb is presented as an ellipse, an adjective is a rhombus etc.;
- various gestures show the detached prefixes in the verbs;
- learning grammar patterns within various lexical content;
- situational pictures associated with certain grammar phenomena;

- transformations of the verbal forms in the text from the Present into the Past tenses;
- the use of various reference books;
- extensive practising in the Internet resources, such as: <http://www.goethe.de/cgi-bin/einstufungstest/einstufungstest.pl>; <http://www.testedich.de/englisch-tests-quizzes.php?katb=0920>; [http://deutsch-uni.by.ru/data/verb\\_pas.shtml](http://deutsch-uni.by.ru/data/verb_pas.shtml); <http://www.ralf-kinas.de/>; [http://www.deutsch-lernen.com/virtual/e\\_test\\_kurz.htm](http://www.deutsch-lernen.com/virtual/e_test_kurz.htm) etc.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The experiment held at the Law Institute of the RUDN University showed that teaching German as a second foreign language faces some problems that can be overcome if special measures are taken. On the one hand, various videos, charts and illustrative materials should be provided for the students to learn more about the history, culture and the current use of the German language. They can be told about the contemporary research and developments described in German. The role of German videos and mass media is of crucial importance for this purpose. The practical experience proved that these measures could increase the learners' interest to the German language and motivate them to study it.

On the other hand, the answer to the question in the title is positive as the grammar of the German language is considered as complicated by the students of the Russian University. The students learning German are under the interference of their native and the first foreign (in most cases it is English) languages. This interference can be either positive or negative. The greatest effect of the negative interference can be observed in learning grammar. The Latin alphabet differs German from Russian and the synthetic structure of the German language opposes it to the analytic system of the English language. However, the Russian learners are familiar with such grammar categories as gender and case as well as with the various endings of the nouns and verbs. Consequently, the teachers' task is to apply as many various educational tasks and assignments in practice as it would be sufficient to assist the students in developing their grammar skills. The more practical language activities the students will have the more effective their learning of the German grammar will be.

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