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СУБЪЕКТИВНЫЕ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЯ РУССКОЯЗЫЧНЫХ ШКОЛЬНИКОВ ОБ ИЗУЧЕНИИ ЧЕШСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

В статье рассматривается преподавание чешского языка школьникам-подросткам, для которых русский язык является родным. Исследование, на котором основана данная статья, было посвящено субъективному восприятию учащимися процесса овладения вторым языком – теме, которая еще не получила подробного освещения в литературе. Однако, с нашей точки зрения, осознание субъективности взгляда ученика является существенным моментом, поскольку угол восприятия учащегося принципиально влияет на успешность педагогической работы. Настоящие результаты основаны на глубинных полуструктурированных интервью с русскоязычными учениками. Среди наиболее важных выводов можно отметить низкий уровень метакогниции среди учащихся, преимущественно пассивный подход к овладению языком и субъективно более высокие требования к навыкам устной речи. Основываясь на результатах проведенного исследования, мы завершаем статью общими дидактическими рекомендациями для преподавания.

Ключевые слова: чешский как второй язык, школьник / студент с родным русским языком, овладение языком, речевые навыки, подросток.

Jana Kovářová

CZECH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION SEEN BY A RUSSIAN-SPEAKING LEARNER

The paper discusses teaching Czech language to Russian speaking adolescent learners. The article is based on a research which focuses on the learners' subjective perception of their second language acquisition. The topic, i. e. subjective perception of Czech language acquisition, has not been researched in detail yet. In our opinion, the topic is important, though, as the learner's subjective perception strongly affects the success of teaching. The research findings are based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with Russian speaking learners. The crucial findings are as follows: low metacognition among adolescent learners, predominantly passive approach towards second language acquisition and (subjectively perceived) demanding nature of oral language skills. At the end of the article some general didactic suggestions are offered.

Key words: Czech as a second language, Russian-speaking learner, language acquisition, oral skills, adolescent

Введение / Introduction. The past twenty years have seen a considerable number of studies devoted to teaching Czech to pupils or adult learners whose mother tongue was Russian. This research concerned both theoretical issues and topics of everyday life. Most of these investigations address the issue from the outside perspective, i.e. they analyse the written and spoken language of learners, call attention to frequent linguistic interference and typical mistakes, or deal with issues of didactics. This paper, on the contrary, adopts a slightly out-of-the-ordinary view, namely a very personal, subjective perspective of a Russian-speaking adolescent learner learning Czech. We are of the opinion that the results obtained may offer language teachers a valuable impetus for planning the structure of the teaching process in classes of this age cohort.

Материалы и методы / Materials and methods. The aim of our investigation was to obtain a general idea of the learners' own perception of the acquisition process of the target language, of their assessment of the language competences gained so far, which language skills were easier to acquire or which were more difficult – and why, and what techniques or methods the learners considered to be most effective for the learning process of Czech. Reaching this goal will offer a deeper insight into the process of thinking of Russian-speaking learners, which is a crucial factor for selecting a suitable didactic solution.

To investigate the topic chosen for our study, we chose the methods of qualitative research. We were interested in the individual subjective view of the learners, and, therefore we found most efficient to choose the method of collecting data through semi-structured interviews. This refers to interviews on an array of topics prepared by the interviewer, who can flexibly step in the exchange and respond to the flow of the conversation and does not have to strictly follow planned questions. For more see e.g. [5, p. 39 or 7, p. 160]. Throughout the interviews the method has proved the right choice. Sometimes it was necessary to reformulate the question, ask the speaker for more details, or check that we got the answer right; such interaction techniques, however, are not possible using questionnaires or structured interviews. The language of spoken discourse was Czech in order that we might be able to compare the subjective self-assessed language achievements of students with their objective speech performance.

A cohort of 17 learners was selected using purposive sampling. (For purposive sampling, typical of qualitative research, “the scope of selection (the number of people, locations) is not based on statistics as in quantitative research, but on saturation. The selection comes to an end when the researcher has arrived at the conclusion that the information obtained on more people does not provide any new data, that it is repetitive“ [3, p. 188] / translation into English by the author/.) They represented participants of a special training course preparing them for admission to university¹. The interviews were conducted in June 2020, immediately before the learners had to sit for their final B2² examination in Czech. With a view to the fact that our findings are based on data obtained from one specific cohort of respondents, we are aware of the limited validity of all the findings: it cannot be absolute. Despite this fact, we think that – for many reasons – selection of this sample was an advantage: the students’ age³ and their mother tongue⁴ were homogeneous – they were entering the course with zero Czech, and were attending the same course. Any possible variations were thus reduced to almost nil. The B2 level attained after the course training indicates that the foreign language speaker can use Czech at such a level as to be able to express his/her thoughts and more complex ideas. (Level B2 is defined as follows: “Can use the language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, academic, vocational or leisure topics, marking clearly the relationships between ideas. Can communicate spontaneously with good grammatical control without much sign of having to restrict what they want to say, adopting a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction, and sustained relationships with users of the target language, quite possible without imposing strain on either party” [1, p. 72]).

The interviews lasting roughly 15 to 30 minutes each were recorded and manually transferred to written text. The analysis that followed used the so called open coding (which is a part of grounded theory method; a process of analysis disclosing the topics of the analysed text. For more details on open coding see e.g. [5, pp 220–238]) and the data obtained were then subject to interpretation using the technique of “card sorting“, which consists in choosing relevant categories obtained during the open coding and their ordering along a line or a picture, which is followed by a description of the interrelated categories (For more facts see e.g. [7, pp 226–227].).

To describe the learners’ accounts, we decided the progress from more general characteristics, i.e. the learners’ subjective assessment of own can-do and description of the language acquisition process, to concrete communication skills (i. e. speaking, writing, reading, and listening).

Результаты и обсуждение / Results and discussion. To start with, we can say that learners tend to rather underestimate their language achievements (*I think I still have bad Czech.; But for me, as I speak now, well, I think that bad, because not satisfied with it.*)⁵; there was not a single case of non-objective language self-confidence. Learners’ attitude to their own achievements does not lack

1 The course referred to is an intensive one year course of Czech preparing foreign students for entering university; it is offered by a Czech institution of higher education and runs from mid-September to mid-June, 18 classes of Czech per week.

2 At the time the interviews were carried out, the learners’ exposure to Czech in this country was 9 months, and throughout this time they attended the above mentioned intensive course of Czech.

3 15 to 19 years of age

4 All the participants were native Russian speakers. The only difference between them was their home country, but all of them came from the former Soviet Union, namely from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. The education system in these countries is similar.

5 Orig.: Myslím, že ještě mám špatnou češtinu.; Ale pro mě, jak mluvím teď, nu, myslím, že špatně, protože s tím nespokojený.

6 All quotations are translated from Czech into English by the author. The incorrect grammar is intentional, mirroring the Czech original. The answers in Czech remain in word-for-word version and were not adapted.

self-criticism (*I think I could study more in the course of the year, but /.../ I am a bit lazy ...*)¹ they feel slightly unselfconscious, a feeling exceptionally bordering even on excessive lack of confidence (*I feel ashamed*)². On the other hand, we found that the respondents made only little use of staying in a country of their target language and their attitudes to the study of Czech were quite reluctant – i.e. they concentrated solely on the tasks assigned by the instructors; thus only roughly one fifth of them were developing their skills consistently beyond the course assignments and outside the class. Although all of the learners were aware that their competence in Czech would be necessary for their future, most of them could hardly imagine what it really entailed and did not assume full responsibility for their training, which is also true about Czech adolescent students. Quite typical of these learners is also their orientation towards short-term goals (passing the language examination or university entrance examination), which seem to them to be an entrance ticket to a trouble-free future, and limited time perspective in general. This finding is evidenced by the fact that only one respondent (a quite competent speaker) did keep expressing his worries about using professional language because he/she was aware of his/her deficiencies and was apprehensive of his/her future professional training. (It is important to note that according to Cummins, communicative competence can be acquired quite quickly, academic language acquisition takes longer, no less than 5 years. [2, p. 24].). However, despite this finding we have noted that the learners' ambitions and general optimism about studies at university and their future career were not negligible. However, in this investigation they will not be the centre of our interest.

To describe how each learner perceived his/her language acquisition seems to be a problem, because the learners were not able to give a full account of the process. The reason of that was not their limited language skills, but the fact that most learners have never been thinking about the language acquisition process, nor did they pay attention to it, and thus are not able to reconstruct it. Some learners admitted that they did not know how it had happened that they had acquired the skills, others were trying to please the interviewer. Some answers were contradictory (e. g. learners claimed not to be able to think Czech, yet immediately added that when speaking translation in their head is not necessary). Only two learners managed to describe the crucial step or marked step forward in the acquisition process. However, for only one of them this was a distinctive motivation element: *... it was at /.../ the end of October, when I had already known a few words, oh no, not a few words, but a few sentences. For example, you are walking down, walk forward. So when a man ask me in the street, so when I answered he, so was, I don't know, very happy that I made a help to this man³; the other learner's experience was not very pleasant ...it was during the night, wanted to sleep but couldn't, because in my head was Czech dream/.../I could not fall asleep, because Czech sounded in my head...⁴. Several other respondents were able to give the time they had realized they could understand much better. Most of them, however – as mentioned above – had a feeling there was no noticeable turning point in the process. It was not difficult, however, to define the transition period of the learners' speaking skills as developed to the point of taking part in conversations (and it may be also assumed, referring to explicit statements of some learners, that this was the time they gave up translating the dialogues). It happened after four to six months⁵ of Czech language training. Three learners out of the cohort, underestimating their level of Czech insisted that they had not yet reached the point of thinking Czech, although the interview immediately following testified to the contrary: they comprehended instantly⁶ what they had heard and were able to give answers without much effort, just like the others.*

We can state – taking into consideration each of the language skills – that perception of their difficulty does not follow along the production – reception axis (which may seem quite unexpected), but still within the contradictory limits of oral skills versus writing skills. The proof of the finding is over half

1 Orig.: Myslím, že jsem mohl studovat víc v průběhu roku, ale /.../ jsem trochu líný...

2 Orig.: Je mi stydno.

3 Orig.:...to bylo na /.../ konci října, když jsem už věděl pár slov, ne pár slov, ale pár vět. Například jdete dolů, jdete dopředu. Tak když jeden pán zeptal mě na ulici, tak když jsem jemu odpověděl, tak měl, nevím jakou radost, že udělal pomoc pro toho pána.

4 Orig.: ... to bylo v noci, chtěl spát, ale nemohl, protože v mé hlavě bylo český snu /.../, nemohl usnout, protože v hlavě zněla čeština...

5 Two learners mentioned three months.

6 Judging from their facial expressions, laughing, gestures, etc.

of the learners considering speaking to be most difficult skill, number two being listening; reading, on the other hand, is rated as the easiest, and writing closely follows. The most serious stumbling block in oral production and perception is the speed of communication: *I think that speaking still poses problems, for me it is difficult how to quickly think out that [word – the author's note] order¹; [Most difficult – the author's note] is speaking and listening, because when I am listening, they are speaking quicker than I can understand, understand what they are saying².*

Another stumbling block for the learners is limited vocabulary; however, those more proficient in conversation practice realize that the reason why occasionally they fail to understand is rather the gap between literal language of the textbooks and their teachers and the non-literary language using slang expressions (or also the Slovak language) they come across in real life: *I have a problem with understanding some people, if a man or woman speaks as if very quickly all, well, forstead a is o, forstead e is i, or if they speak Slovak, then also, but they are really many, such people /.../ when I walk in Prague, I go to a shop, I always hear "good" instead of "well" and so on³.*

Learners relate their speaking difficulties to the pandemic of spring 2020⁴ as, allegedly, being the cause that made training speaking skills impossible. What, however, has followed from the interviews, was that there was a way out of the situation, and learners who did want to train speaking practised the skill by talking to the staff of the hall of residence, one learner made friends with Czechs to communicate on-line, etc. A completely contradictory attitude was adopted by a learner who shared his/her room in the hall with a Czech; however, neither of them invested time and effort in making use of the fact: *We don't communicate, don't understand he, because he has Czech, Moravian-Czech, because when he speaks for example, ehm, [imitating that he does not understand], I don't understand⁵.* However, the same learners complaining about inadequate speaking opportunities admit at the same time that they feel restrained to speak Czech, and, if, possible, avoid any communication. Our long experience with Russian-speaking learners can confirm protracted communication barriers of some of them: they manage to avoid oral contact even for years, spending their time in the Russian-speaking community. Thus we find important to follow in schools such methodological recommendations (see [6, pp 47–48]) as not to cumulate in one class learners of the same native language⁶. Informal encounters with their teachers were useful for us to learn how strenuous they find to teach a class with three or even more foreigners speaking three or more foreign languages, and what easier they would find (it seemed to them) to have in class several foreigners using the same mother tongue. In the long perspective, however, imposing higher demand on learners from the very start will be beneficial both to the teachers and the learners.

While most learners judge production and perception of a spoken text difficult, right the opposite is true about the written text. No questioned learner found reading problematic, but saw it even easy. It is to be mentioned that this finding is strictly personal and subjective and may not agree with reality. Learners sometimes only assume to understand the text, as our own teaching practice has shown; nevertheless, a deeper probe into their comprehension will disclose they do not understand concrete details, or, what is more, even, the basic message of the text remained hidden or was misunderstood. We admit that to some extent the same refers to Czech speaking students.

Also writing was rated among the easier skills, surprisingly. However, analysing the interviews, we have arrived at a conclusion that this is a slightly misleading fact, or, in other words, that the contradiction was due to a different approach of the interviewer, i.e. an instructor a generation older than the respondents, and of the adolescent learners, irrespective of their foreign language origin. The

1 Orig.: Myslím, že ještě dělá problémy mluvení, pro mě je těžké, jako rychle vymyslet ten [slovní] pořádek.

2 Orig.: [Nejtěžší je] Mluvení a poslouchání, protože když poslouchám, oni mluví rychleji, než já můžu pochopit, pochopit.

3 Orig.: ... mám problém s rozuměním u některých lidí, jestliže nějaký pán nebo paní mluví jakoby velmi rychle všechny, no, zamísto a je o, zamísto e je i, nebo jestliže mluví slovensky, tak také, ale je jich opravdu mnoho, takových lidí /.../ když chodím po Praze, jdu do obchodu, vždycky slyším „dobrý“ místo „dobře“ a tak dál...

4 Between mid-March 2020 and May 2020 the course switched from an attendance one to an on-line one.

5 Orig.: Nekomunikujeme, nerozumím ho, protože má český, moravsko-český, protože když mluví, například hnhm [imituje nesrozumitelnou řeč], nerozumím.

6 The authors (see the reference) recommend a maximum of 3 or 4 pupils of the same mother tongue (other than Czech) in a class, however, an ideal situation is to have one such a pupil in a class. The methodical instruction is intended for primary school but undoubtedly it is valid also at secondary school.

learners saw an advantage in having sufficient time for writing a text, in having peace and quiet to think the topic over, in using open textbooks for writing, i. e. first of all dictionaries (without exception on-line ones), sample texts and grammar overviews. Some of the cognitive processes present while speaking do not take place here, i.e. processes like recalling the vocabulary or rules of grammar. Hence, this is why writing is rated quite easy by the producer.

By no means do we want to discard the above approach, because, first of all, learners have a right to make use of it, to a certain extent (they grew up surrounded by modern technologies), and, also, such approach is often functional. From our past experience we know that making use of the above teaching aids in their practice, foreigners can effectively join the written communication process. Moreover, such modern equipment being available, learners, naturally, want to make their work easier. And, what is more, frequently their perfectionist effort goes into having the text “nice“, without mistakes, rather than having an easy job. The thing is that only very few learners adopt a purposeful and deliberate attitude to learning and do grasp the importance of mistakes in the learning process, and the drawback of using aids:... *for example, when I was writing the character description, so often used the internet, so I often googled, but this is not possible, it, because [laughter]. I thought I know everything about the character description /---/. When I was writing the examen, so I could not write normal, because had not a dictionary, Google and something else /.../ forgot the words I had studied. And this is not good¹.*

Nevertheless, from the point of didactics – such an approach to writing, losing its active character and becoming a passive process of compilation, is not acceptable for the learner (being not aware of it), who is thus deprived of a chance to develop his/her language competence. We are convinced that it is desirable to introduce writing as part of the in-class process. To spend a lesson on a writing assignment and watch learners write may seem a luxury, a loss of time the teacher can hardly afford; nevertheless, contrary to home assignment, the use of teaching aids can be restricted or fully eliminated. However, even other activities are irreplaceable. The very learners found most useful the teacher’s in-class explanations and analyses of sample texts, most important for one respondent² were analyses of mistakes and lessons through feedback: *I think that [for me the most important is – added by the author] that I see my mistakes, then, after, afterwards, when the teacher /.../ corrected, yes, I see simply, where something is wrong and simply in the next text I will pay attention to it³.* As follows from what has been said, the majority of learners find it more effective if they have to actively use the facts from the feedback (in e. g. tailor-made exercises, and so on) or else they are not bothered to pay enough attention to it.

As for the favour and difficulty of the individual genres our summary is that they depend entirely on the subjective personal preferences of learners. Some prefer genres with a relatively free structure, such as narrative writing and character descriptions, offering a topic known to the learner; more intellectually-minded learners prefer to present their ideas in reflective essays; others prefer administrative genres (letters of application or of complaints having a fixed and unchangeable structure). Based on our own teaching experience, we believe that native Czech students would give the same answers. Thus it has not been proven that some very concrete genres being on the general curriculum at secondary schools were seen extremely difficult by the majority of the native Russian speakers, or even something they were not able to cope with and would necessarily need extra attention.

Заклучение / Conclusion. To conclude, we want to stress that besides the foreign language the key factor of students’ answers is the age characteristic of the cohort. (i. e. adolescent age). Interviews with the cohort have proven the necessity of applying secondary-school pedagogy and didactics, even

1 Orig.: ... například když jsem psal charakteristiku, tak často používal internet, tak jsem často googlil, ale to není možné, to, protože [laughter]. Myslel jsem, že já vím o charakteristice všechno /.../. Když jsem psal examen, tak nemohl normálně napsat, protože neměl jsem slovník, Google a ještě něco jiného /.../ já zapomněl ta slova, která jsem studoval. A to je špatně.

2 It was a learner who took a very active approach to the acquisition of the target language, using many available resources, far beyond the standard assignments. The learner clearly preferred communication success over grammar accuracy.

3 Orig.: Myslím, že [nejdůležitější pro mě je] to, že vidím své chyby, pak, po, potom, když učitelka /.../ opravila, ano, vidím prostě, kde je něco špatně a prostě v příštím textu budu dávat pozor na to.

though the respondents had completed their secondary education in their home countries¹. Following from their answers is also the fact that – so far – most of the learners do not yet have a detached view on life, i.e. they are not able to see matters in a wider perspective. Many lack the ability of metacognition, i. e. reflection of the self-education process, many even “cannot learn“, i.e. are not acquainted with the learning strategies² and their approach to learning is not active. Consequently, the big task for teachers is not only teaching the language and self-development motivation, but deepening (in particular) one of the competences – underdeveloped as yet, that is the learning competence.

Findings following from the research – and recommendations based on them – may be summarized as follows:

Learners rather underestimate their language attainments and find it difficult to back-reconstruct the process of own foreign language acquisition. This is so because no adequate attention is paid to it. It would definitely be useful to make use of self-assessment (CEFR „can do“ statements / see [1, pp 177–181] / or tailor-made self-assessment forms may be applied.) and other self-reflection techniques being at the same time an element of motivation (see also [4, pp 97–100]).

The approach to language acquisition of most learners is rather passive and their language profit from living in the target language environment is not very high. A way to overcome the problem is make use of techniques of task-based learning, which consists in learners solving real life situations in an authentic environment (e. g. searching information in Czech materials, aim-based following of a Czech youtuber, blogger and so like, calling an infoline and requesting information, going to a post office or bank to settle a matter, etc.).

On average, it took respondents four to six months of intensive study of Czech to feel successful in communication situations with a native speaker; this was approximately the time they started to think Czech.

Acquisition of oral communication skills (i. e. speaking and listening) is rated as more demanding than acquiring graphic skills (i. e. reading and writing); the most important factors affecting the subjective feeling of difficulty is ample time versus shortage of time and use versus non-use of aids (translators, grammar overviews, etc.) It is these factors the teachers should aim at and vary the parameters so as to increase the language competence the learners.

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¹ The learners had passed a school-leaving examination, an equivalent of a similar Czech exam called “maturita“.

² A rare exception was a student, who said: ...also when I listen to something I have subtitles in front of me so it works. Two senses work together and so I remember better.“ (Orig.: ... také když něco poslouchám, mám před sebou titulky, tak je to funguje. Dva smysly fungují spolu, a tak pamatuju lépe.)

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