
Investigating the attitudes towards learning a third language and its culture in Polish junior high school

Badanie podejścia do uczenia się języka trzeciego oraz jego kultury w polskim gimnazjum

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Abstract

It is believed that attitudes to languages and culture tend to affect achievement in foreign language learning (Baker, 1997). Thus, this factor may be seen as crucial when it comes to the discrepancies in attainment in different languages learnt by the same students. Therefore, it seems vital to investigate variation in attitudes towards both learning L2 together with the approach to the L2 culture and the corresponding issues with respect to L3. Nevertheless, the general attitude towards learning languages needs to be taken into account as well. This article discusses the attitudes towards learning two pairs of languages, specifically: English as L2 and German as L3 and German as L2 and English as L3. A group of lower high school learners from Poland took part in the study and the data was gathered by means of questionnaires, which included both closed and open-ended questions. The study is based on and inspired by a similar survey by Simsek et al. (2007). The main objective of the present paper is to shed light on the well-known problem that students who are reasonably successful in learning L2 have a problem with studying L3 (Hufeisen & Neuner, 2004).

Key words: attitude towards language learning, L2, L3.

Abstrakt

Istnieje przekonanie, że postawa wobec języka i kultury ma wpływ na osiągnięcia w nauce języka obcego (Baker, 1997). Dlatego też ten czynnik może być postrzegany jako kluczowy podczas porównywania różnic w osiągnięciach tych samych uczniów jeśli chodzi o naukę innych języków. W związku z tym, istotnym wydaje się być badanie podejścia uczniów do uczenia się języka drugiego (J2) oraz ich podejścia do kultury związanej z tym językiem, a także badanie korespondujących aspektów w języku trzecim (J3). Co więcej, pod uwagę należy brać również ogólne nastawienie uczniów do nauki języków obcych. Poniższy artykuł przedstawia badanie dotyczące podejścia do uczenia się dwóch par języków, tj. angielskiego jako J2 i niemieckiego jako J3, oraz niemieckiego jako J2 i angielskiego jako J3. Grupą badawczą jest grupa polskich gimnazjalistów, a dane zostały zebrane za pomocą kwestionariuszy zawierających zarówno pytania zamknięte, jak i otwarte. Badanie opiera się w dużej mierze na kwestionariuszu, którego użyli Simsek et al. (2007) badając podejście do nauki języka niemieckiego w Turcji. Głównym celem poniższego artykułu jest próba wyjaśnienia dobrze znanego problemu polegającego na tym, że często uczniowie, którzy odnoszą względny sukces w nauce J2 mają problemy w nauce J3 (Hufeisen & Neuner, 2004).

Słowa kluczowe: podejście do nauki języka, J2, J3.

Learning L3 in Polish schools

It has only been five years since a second foreign language was introduced as compulsory in the core curriculum at junior high schools (pl. *gimnazjum*) in Poland in 2009. Before that the status of L3 at public schools had been vague and undefined; thus, the learning of L3 was at many times regarded as superfluous by many public school learners because of its position of an extracurricular subject. On the other hand, it goes without saying that foreign language learning in Poland is recognized as important and language learning industry continuously offers a wide choice of services. The changes at

junior high school have also influenced the remaining educational levels and currently more attention is given to teaching languages (Marciniak, 2009). Moreover, the linguistic policy of the European Union supports learning of at least two foreign languages at school in order to ensure linguistic variety within the Union, to enhance the communication. At the same time, the European Union's strategy towards language learning translates into the development of multilingualism within the Union (Jessner, 2008).

It is clear that learning another foreign language may be problematic for a number of different reasons. The cognitive load of having to study another linguistic system from scratch when the previous one (i.e. L2) has not been well-rooted yet may exceed learners' ability as simply being unachievable within the cognitive capacity of a given student (Schnotz & Kürschner, 2007). Notwithstanding the foreseeable problems with L3 learning, the expectations and requirements on the part of the educationists designing the core curriculum are usually relatively high. Therefore, students who attend integration classes and have mild mental retardation or deep dyslexia may be exempted from L3 classes, which only illustrates how challenging it may be to learn another foreign language.

Another problem is that L3 teaching usually takes place in separation from L2 lessons as if the processes were completely distinct, which may not be the case (Kiermasz, 2013). Similarly to the foregone conclusion that the use of L1 in L2 teaching is detrimental (cf. Cook, 2003), it appears that the modern L3 teaching fails to recognize the value of L1 and L2 knowledge as well. Although the fear of negative transfer (i.e. interference) may be explainable, it is crucial to notice the opportunity of positive transfer. Undoubtedly, the knowledge of other languages is vital in terms of making L3 learning easier; however, it is frequently ignored that the experience in language learning itself may be valuable for the subsequent languages learning. Lack of interconnections between L2 and L3 teaching makes students experience the same difficulties again and hampers the learning instead of facilitating it. To exemplify, knowing that a group of learners study both English and German, teachers who know both languages could explicitly indicate the links between these languages in the course of teaching. This can happen, for example, during the

process of teaching vocabulary when a teacher can include information about cognates and false friends.

Another point is that language at school is frequently treated as any other school subject. However, apart from the sheer linguistic aspects of language, its culture and history are also significant, which will be shown in this paper. It is especially important to talk about these issues when considering language teaching in Poland where the historical events and the past linguistic policy had created an unfriendly atmosphere in which learning of Russian and German was seen as an unpleasant duty instead of understanding it as an enriching experience. Undoubtedly, there are a number of issues related to the problem of low attainment in L3. In this article the main focus will be on the place of attitude in language learning both in the sense of its relationship with the language itself and the culture associated with this language. It is also important to state that learning another foreign language creates a number of opportunities, which may discharge all the negative issues usually associated with learning L3, but, regrettably, the discussion of these would be beyond the scope of this paper.

The role of attitude in language learning

Language learning is a complex process and it is affected by a number of factors; one of them is language attitude, which, in general, may be defined as “the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others” (Crystal, 1992: 25). When it comes to language education, it is important to look at attitude from at least a few different perspectives, that is to reflect on language learning attitude in general, but also to think about more specific attitude towards acquisition of particular languages, as well as the attitude towards the culture and society associated with the languages at hand. This position has been supported by a number of researchers, as Gardner (1985) stated that attitude towards language is one of the key factors affecting language learning, and Ellis (1994: 200) wrote that “in general, positive attitudes towards the L2, its speakers, and its culture can be expected to enhance learning and negative attitudes to impede learning.” It needs to be stated that attitude

is a complex term since, according to Baker (1988), it is both cognitive and affective, thus it incorporates both thoughts and feelings. Moreover, attitude is rather dimensional than bipolar; namely, it is never purely positive or negative, but it is rather placed on a continuum ranging from negativity to positivity with a neutral position in the halfway of the scale. However, for the simplicity's sake researchers tend to divide attitudes into three abovementioned categories (cf. Simsek et al. 2007). It is widely recognized that attitude is learnt instead of being inherited. However, although it is not passed down with genes, it is definitely affected by the history of nations and current political and socio-economic situation in the modern world where one grows up and lives; therefore, it is more of a product of nurture than nature of human beings. Attitude does not seem to fluctuate, it is rather fixed, but it may be subject to change if significant conditions come into being. Most importantly, attitude is likely to affect learner's actions (Simsek et al. 2007), which is a crucial point of the discussion which will be developed in this article.

Research project

The study reported on in the present paper aims at discussing the attitudes towards learning L3 in a Polish junior high school. The research design itself is based on a parallel study by Simsek et al. (2007) and it draws on the methodology used by the authors; however, the original study was conducted in Turkey, whereas the present research project was carried out in Poland. The main research question in the study was the following: what is the attitude towards learning a third language and its culture in a junior high school? However, the study could not focus on L3s solely — in order to compare the research results achieved for different L3s, it seemed reasonable to compare the findings with the analogical data obtained for L2s.

Participants

The study involved 12 participants, 9 of them were females, 3 were males. They were aged between 16 and 17 and attended second or third grade of a junior high school in Lodz. Although the number of participants may

be considered modest, the author does not aim at generalizing the data obtained by the means of this research, but rather treats it as an indication of the trends which will definitely have to be confirmed by corroborating a similar research project on a larger scale. As far as the languages are concerned, 6 students had English as their L2 and German as their L3 and 6 students had German as their L2 and English as their L3. For the sake of clarity, the group with English as L2 will be referred to as Group 1 and the other group will henceforward be called Group 2. They had been learning their respective L2s for approximately 7 years and L3s for 2-3 years. Although the L3s are central to the study, references to L2s will be made throughout the paper. It is important to state that the learners included in the study are, in general, not high-achievers. As to their marks in L2s, they are in general the same, i.e. $M=3.5$ for English and $M=3.5$ for German. On the other hand, in reference to L3s, the mean for German as L3 ($M=2.5$) is one point lower than for English as L3 ($M=3.5$).

Research methods

The study applies questionnaire as a research method, the survey used in the research project consists of two main parts, namely closed questions and open-ended questions. The former part applies a 5-point Likert scale. Separate parts of the survey aimed at researching a) general attitude towards language learning, b) attitude towards learning L2 and c) attitude towards the culture and society associated with L2; another two parts (i.e. d) and e)) included mirror questions for L3. Regarding the open-ended questions, these included writing down the associations with both English and German. The author hoped that the attractive and, in a way, unrestricted form of the open-ended questions would increase students' readiness to express and share their opinions as the questions about associations took the form of a mind-map with the central concept in the middle and arrows for the participants' associations. The remaining open-ended questions were related to the students' basic knowledge about the English-speaking and German-speaking countries (the author asked them to enumerate the relevant countries and a few famous people who come from either German-spe-

aking or English-speaking countries) in order to see if students had the essential knowledge about the culture of the countries where the languages in question are spoken, and were used by the author to assure herself that the participants possessed the basic knowledge about the culture of English-speaking and German-speaking countries.

Results

The results will be presented in a way which reflects the design of the questionnaire on which this study is based. Therefore, the results will include the description of learners general attitude towards language learning, attitude towards learning German, attitude towards German culture and society, attitude towards learning English and attitude towards English culture and society. Unfortunately, the research group in this study is too small to draw any far-reaching conclusions and, therefore, the results should be treated only as an indication of a trend which needs to be investigated more meticulously in the future. Consequently, the results evidenced in this paper will be presented accordingly with the assumptions of a case study. The analysis of the results necessitates applying a scale according to which the attitudes expressed by the participants should be divided between positive ($M=4$ and above), neutral (mean between 3.9 and 2.6) and negative ($M=2.5$ and below) (Simsek, et al., 2007).

Attitude towards language learning

As to the attitude towards learning foreign languages, the questionnaires revealed that both groups of the learners have a positive or neutral attitude towards language learning in a general sense, i.e. learning any language. Figure 1 below illustrates the results and the paragraphs beneath the table discuss individual questions in detail.

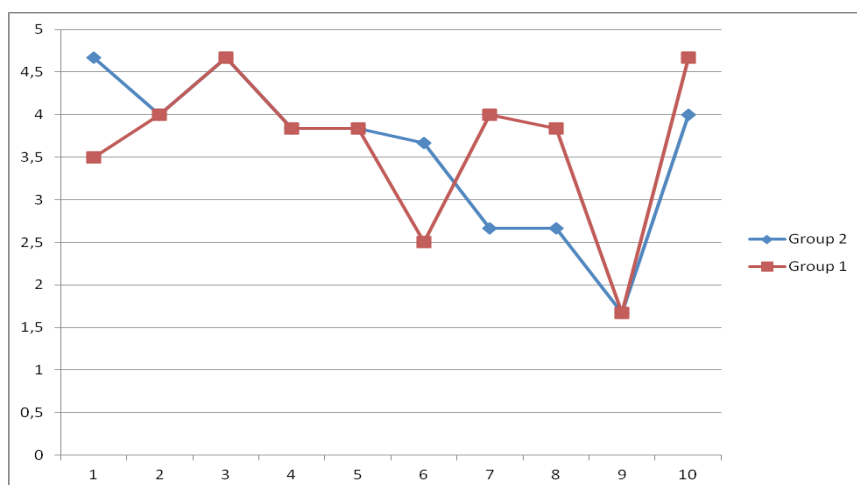


Figure 1.

Attitude towards language learning (x — numerical values for questions; y — points on the Likert scale)

As far as the answers to the specific questions are concerned, the participants stated that they like learning foreign languages (Group 2 $M=4$), (Group 1 $M=4.66$) (question 10) and that they would like to learn a foreign language at school even if they did not have to ($M=4$ for both groups) (question 2). They agreed that they would like to know a language of a given country if they were to visit this place ($M=4.66$) (question 3); however, their attitude towards the idea of learning a language in order to read something in this language is rather neutral with a tendency towards a positive attitude ($M=3.83$ for questions 4 and 5 in both groups). It also transpired that the learners who took part in the research project do not really believe that learning and using a foreign language impedes their competence in their mother tongue ($M=1.66$ for both groups), which is a very positive standpoint as they probably do not think of the possibility of a negative transfer from L2 and/or L3 to L1 (question 9).

In a number of ways the attitudes of learners from Group 1 and Group 2 are similar; nevertheless, there are certain differences which need to be pointed out. That is, learners of Group 1 had a much more positive

attitude ($M=4$) towards the assumption that learning L2 or L3 makes them more confident (question 7), whereas learners from Group 2 were much less positive about this idea ($M=2.66$). Moreover, as regards question 8, which referred to the issue of people who speak two or more languages being able to think more critically and comprehensively than those who use only one language, it transpired that the participants from Group 2 were much less convinced about this idea ($M=2.66$) than those from Group 1 ($M=3.83$). Having shown that the attitude towards language learning expressed by the participants may be considered positive, it is crucial to shift the focus to the more specific issues.

Attitude towards learning German

This section pinpoints the issue of the attitude towards learning German by the participants who study this language as their L2 and those who study German as an L3. Rather surprisingly, it transpired that the students from Group 2 do not necessarily have a more positive attitude towards learning this language than those students who learn German as L3, which is clearly illustrated by figure 2 below. This stands in contrast to the preconceived notion that the attitude towards learning the first foreign language should, actually, be more positive than it is in the case of the second foreign language; surprisingly, those participants from Group 1 have much lower marks in German than those with German as L2 (i.e. one point difference).

In order to investigate the participants' attitude towards learning German, 10 questions were posed. Question 1 refers to the statement: *I like learning German*; the means for this question were quite similar (Group 2 $M= 2.50$, Group 1 $M= 2.67$), which indicates a neutral attitude in the case of the group with English as L2; it is also worth mentioning that the difference between the scores is not considerable. A result which again shows similarity between the two groups' answers ($M=3$ for Group 2 and $M=3.17$ for Group 1) refers to the issue of the worldwide importance of German (question 5) and indicates that the importance of German is only partially recognized by the students since their attitude is neutral.

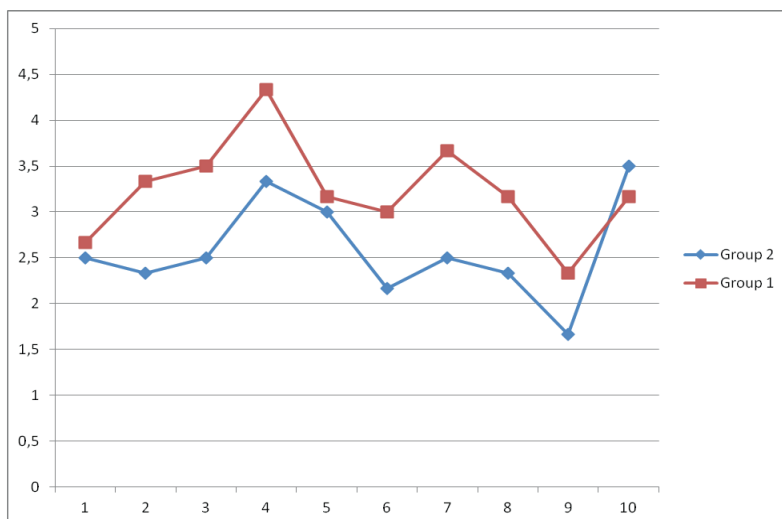


Figure 2.

The attitude towards learning German(x — numerical values for questions; y — points on the Likert scale

In spite of these few similarities, the findings show that the results achieved by Group 1 are higher than those achieved by the other group. It is worth noticing that the results for the groups differ in a similar way; that is, when the result for the group with English as L2 rises, the score of Group 2 rises as well and when one variable drops, the other one also declines. Both groups express a negative attitude in? question 9 which relates to the participants' opinions about a possibility of beginning the process of learning German earlier in their lives if they could ($M=1.67$ in Group 2, $M=2.33$ for Group 1). However, it seems interesting that when asked if they would like to learn German to such an extent that they were as proficient in this language as possible (question 4), the group with English as L2 obtained a one point higher means ($M=4.33$), which indicates that this group's attitude is more positive than of Group 2 ($M=3.33$), which is only neutral. When asked if learning German is important because it will be useful in the future, e.g. when applying for a job (question 3), both groups expressed a neutral attitude with $M=3.5$ for Group 1 and $M=2.5$ for Group 2.

Apart from the closed questions discussed above, the participants were also asked to answer open-ended questions about the associations that they have with the German language, which were subsequently analyzed by the author and divided into positive, negative and neutral. The associations are presented below in a form of a table and include the ideas provided by both groups.

	Group 2 (German as L2)	Group 1 (German as L3)
Positive	Super, I like talking to Germans, I like learning German.	Funny, getting to know new people and visiting new places, linguistic development.
Neutral	Berlin, Germany, Pizza, Spaghetti.	mountains, German sausage, umlaut, lessons, school, German teacher, dancers, The Chancellor of Germany
Negative	Fascism, The World War II, Hitler, difficult, boring, rigid, tortures.	Evil, death, Fascism, The World War II, Hitler, Crisis, AIDS, difficult, difficult to understand, disliked, unpleasant, it sounds harsh, strange, difficult words, strange words, long words.

Table 1.

Associations with German divided into three categories: positive, neutral and negative for Group 1 (German as L3) and Group 2 (German as L2).

As can be inferred from Table 1, Group 1 managed to provide a bigger number of associations with German than the group with German as L2. This, however, does not imply that the latter group expressed a more positive attitude towards German by means of their associations; quite the contrary, these participants enumerated a number of negative associations, which — apart from the clear references to the nature of language itself — allude also to the history of Germany. It may be surprising that even though the Second World War remains within the realm of history now, it is still vivid in the young people’s consciousness. For this reason

when students think about German it is entwined with an undertone of the terror of the war and the notions of fascism. Apart from that, the participants from Group 1 commented on the character of the German language. They focused on lexis by writing that words in this language are long, difficult and strange; moreover, they stated that the way it sounds is harsh. They also commented on the way they perceive German which, in their opinion, turns out to be a difficult and unpleasant language. Similar associations were given by the other group; however, their number was lower. Although the negative associations were prevalent among the participants, there are also positive statements given by the group with German as L2; these boil down to the word “super” and the fact that some of the participants like learning German and talking to Germans. The other group stated that German is funny, knowing it makes it possible to visit new places and meet new people; what is more, learning German denotes linguistic development. Students produced a vast number of associations which the author decided to include in the group of neutral connotations. These are inclusive of references mainly to culture such as: food, places in Germany and, in the case of the group with English as L2, references to school.

Attitude towards German culture and society

In this section the main focus will be shifted from the language itself to the attitudes towards German culture and society. It is not easy to talk about the attitude towards the culture associated with the German language as it is spoken in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxemburg and Lichtenstein. The participants were asked 9 questions, the results are presented in a graphic form in the Figure 3 below. Moreover, a number of associations discussed in the section above refers not only to the German language, but also to the society and culture intertwined with this tongue; therefore, this section will only supplement what has already been stated in the paper.

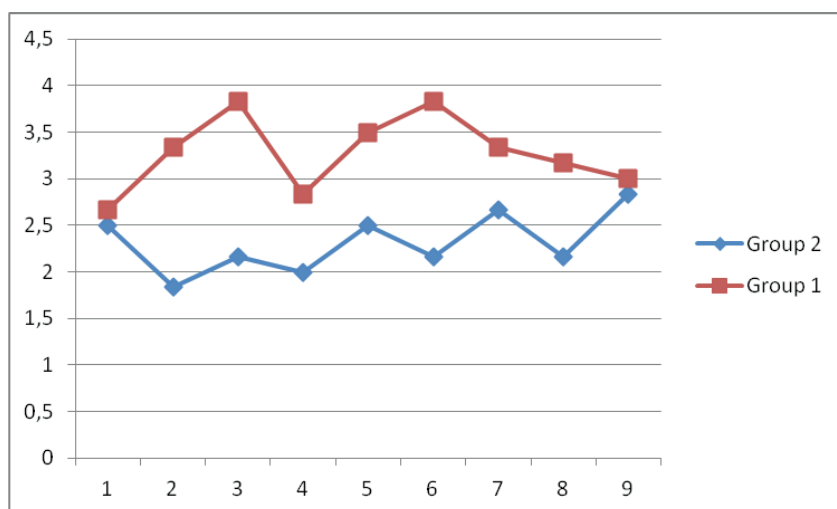


Figure 3.
The attitude towards German society and culture(x - numerical values for questions;
y - points on the Likert scale.)

It is straightforward that there are only two points in the graph above where the answers of two groups were similar (questions 1 and 9) and the remaining points (questions 2-8) show a discrepancy in the attitudes expressed by two groups of participants. It is counterintuitive that the group learning a language as L2 expresses a much less positive attitude towards the culture of this language than the group learning the language as L3. With regard to the specific question, when asked if they have a positive attitude towards German culture and society (question 3), the participants with German as L2 expressed a negative attitude ($M=2.17$), whereas the other group a neutral one ($M=3.83$). In question 4, the participants were asked about their attitude towards the following statement: *The more I know about German culture and society, the more fluent I want to be in their language*. The group with German as L2 showed a negative attitude ($M=2.00$), while the group with German as L3 a neutral one ($M=2.83$). This question serves as an illustration to a general trend demonstrated in this section, which amounts to the

conclusion that the attitude towards the same language may be more positive in the case of learning it as an L3 than an L2.

Attitude towards learning English

As far as learning English is concerned, the students with English as their L2 have a very positive attitude towards this language — all of them maintained that they completely agree with the statement that they like learning English ($M=5.00$). On the other hand, the opinions expressed by learners of English as L3 (i.e. Group 2) are not as positive as in the case of the previous group; however, their attitude towards learning this language seems more favorable than towards learning German, which is actually their L2 ($M=3.33$ for learning English and 2.50 for German). It strikes the author as interesting that in this part of the questionnaire the attitudes towards each of the questions were never negative (except for the last question which, in fact, was key-reversed) with the lowest mean for the group with German as L2 which equals $M=3.33$, whereas for the same group the lowest score for the attitudes associated with German was $M=1.67$. Similarly, in the case of the other group, the lowest score in the presently discussed part of the survey was $M=4.5$ and as to the corresponding questions about German, the lowest result equals $M=2.33$.

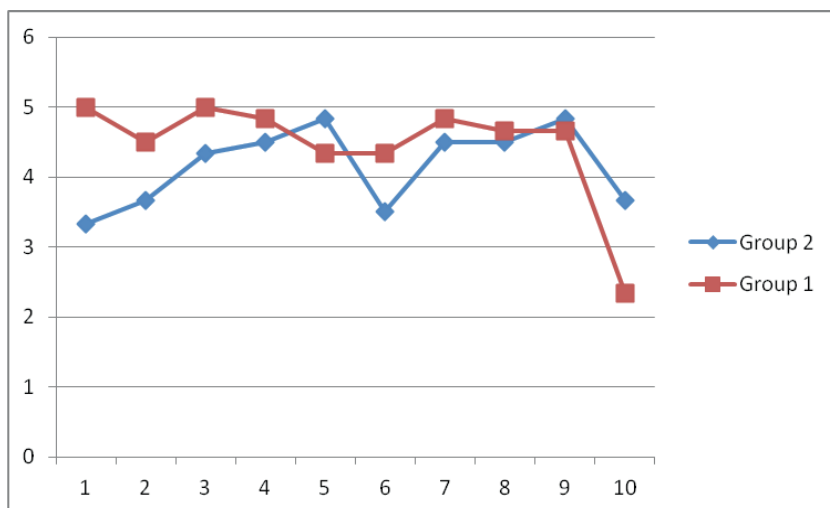


Figure 4.
The attitude towards learning English (x — numerical values for questions; y — points on the Likert scale.)

It seems interesting that when asked if it is difficult to learn German at school, students agreed that it is a challenging task; however, upon being asked the same question about English, the obtained results indicate that Group 2 was much more positive about the possibility of acquiring the knowledge of English at school, whereas the other group was more sceptical about this issue. More information about the participants' attitudes is to be found in Table 2 below, which presents the associations with English expressed by both groups of the participants. The table is analogous to Table 1 illustrating associations with German.

	Group 1 (English as L2)	Group 2 (English as L3)
Positive	I learn it eagerly, nice, easy, useful, pleasant, funny, easy words, it broadens contacts	pleasant, useful, it makes it easier to communicate with anybody, easy grammar, some words are the same as in Polish or similar, popularity, it is spoken very frequently
Neutral	worldwide, Barack Obama, dancers, music, One Direction, school, lessons, English teacher, London, America, tea, hamburgers, creepy pasta (i.e. urban legends, creepy stories), big emigration	Big Ben, Queen Elisabeth, England, London, Selena Gomez, Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber, a lot of celebrities, computer games, medium difficulty
Negative	tenses, strange accent (USA), drunkards from the islands, prince Harry in SS uniform, They didn't want to help us when Germans attacked.	-

Table 2.

Associations with English divided into three categories: positive, neutral and negative for Group 1 (German as L3) and Group 2 (German as L2).

Although Table 2 is partially self-explanatory, it is worthwhile to focus on a few issues revealed by the associations provided by the students. The salient feature of the table is that students from the group with German as L2 did not report any negative association of English. On the other hand, the group with English as L2 actually gave a few of these which refer both to the nature of the language and the particular areas of potential problems, that is tenses and pronunciation; moreover, they also referred to the events discussed by the media at the time when the survey was administered, the stereotype of Englishmen drinking loads of alcohol, and issues referring to history. It seems striking that the group with German as L2 actually managed to provide more positive associations with English than the group learning the language as L2. The positive associations given by both groups are similar in their nature as they evolve around such aspects of English as its easiness, overall prominence and attractiveness

of this language. Similarly to Table 1, many of the associations were put in the part of the table containing neutral ideas given by the participants; these, in both groups, refer to famous people from the English-speaking countries, food, places and music.

Attitude towards English society

Similarly to German, it is obvious that English is not spoken in one country only, it is the language of the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada and a number of other countries (due to the colonization period); apart from that, it is also a modern lingua franca (Edwards, 2004) which is used for international communication between non-native speakers. As in the case of German, some of the aspects connected with the culture and society have already been mentioned in the section that focuses primarily on German language, because students' associations with language and its culture were difficult to separate from each other. For this reason, the results obtained by the questionnaire comprise an addition to the previous section.

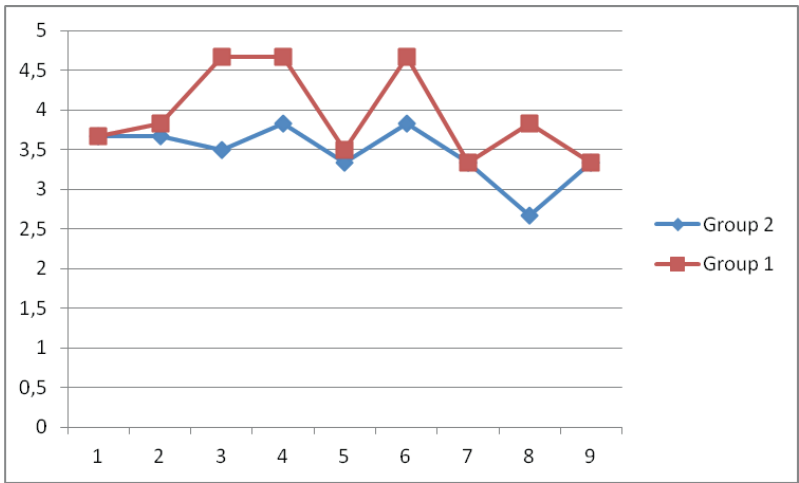


Figure 5.

The attitude towards English society and culture (x — numerical values for questions; y — points on the Likert scale.)

As far as the learners of English as L2 are concerned, they self-evaluated their attitude as being positive $M=4.66$, whereas the learners from Group 2 as a neutral one $M=3.5$. The answers for the statement 4, namely *The more I get to know about English culture and society, the more fluent I want to be in their language*, were again positive in the case of the learners of English as L2 ($M= 4.66$) and neutral in the case of learners of English as L3 (i.e. Group 2) ($M=3.83$). It is interesting that both groups achieved the same score when asked if Polish people are perceived by the English in a positive way ($M=3.33$), which designates a neutral attitude.

Limitations of the study

Limitations of the study presented in this paper are, undoubtedly, numerous. To begin with, since school marks were mentioned in the present paper a number of times as an indicator of learners' success in mastering a given language, it is important to state that marks given at school on many occasions may not necessarily reflect learners' abilities in a foreign language objectively. Although operating in the course grading system, every teacher is different, and marks given by one teacher may perhaps vary from marks given by another teacher,. Another problem is that learners' individual differences could have played a role by influencing the results especially as the research groups were relatively small. The size of the groups is yet another problem as the number of the participants makes it impossible to generalize the outcomes of the research project, which needs to be treated only as a pilot study. What is more, it is difficult to decide which associations provided by the students fall into each of the categories from their point of view and the participants probably should have been asked to state what kind of connotation a given word or phrase brings to them. Having not asked the students, the author — using common sense — divided the associations into three different categories; however, this division is open to question.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

Drawing any far-reaching conclusions on the basis of a small-scale study like the one described in this paper would be ill-advised; on the other hand, it is worth suggesting that a similar study be carried out on a larger scale

and should include also other languages which are taught in public schools. Apart from that, it seems that the attitudes do not necessarily follow a pre-conceived way of thinking about their relation to learning. At the outset of this research project, the author believed that the attitude towards a given language may actually show a relationship with the fact that it is learnt as an L2 or L3; therefore, the results transpired to be unforeseen and, for this reason, worthy of note. Moreover, the research project also brought out the issue that the marks achieved by the students in English or German are not actually equivalent with the attitude towards the language being learnt. It is important to state openly that the results were not correlated and the outcomes discussed in this section are based on the author's analysis which was possible owing to a limited number of participants. It is crucial to emphasize the role of the individual differences of the participants in each of the groups as it seems that the group with English as L2 could have been more willing to express positive attitude in general, whereas the members of the other group may have been more sceptical on the whole, which may result from, for example, their character. However, having said this, it still seems that the attitude towards the culture and society plays an important role in language learning and it may affect the process of acquiring a language. The author suggests more care be taken to make sure that students' feelings towards the languages they learn are not negative. This should be taken into consideration by the teachers of L3s as it seems more demanding on the part of a learner to acquire another foreign language.

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