

Received: 30.01.2023

doi: <https://www.doi.org/10.46763/JESPT2318162t>

UDC: 373.5.018.556:81'242(497.7):303.42

Revised: 14.06.2023

Accepted: 16.06.2023

ATTITUDES OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TOWARD MOTHER TONGUE USAGE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Marija Todorova¹, Vesna Prodanovska-Poposka²

¹Faculty of Philology, Goce Delchev University, Shtip, Macedonia

marija.todorova@ugd.edu.mk

²Faculty of Biotechnical Science, St. Kliment Ohridski University- Bitola

vesna.prodanovska@uklo.edu.mk

Abstract. This paper sheds light on the students' opinions and attitudes about mother tongue (MT) usage in the foreign language (FL) classroom. The purpose of the paper is to determine the students' perception of MT usage and its impact on FL learning and the acquisition process. This research is a continuation and complements to the research conducted and analyzed in the article published in the international journal "Vospitanie" under the title "Teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching". For the purposes of this research, a survey was conducted to observe the students' specific attitudes, i.e, how they actually experience the foreign language teaching process with and without the usage of the mother tongue, to highlight the reasons and factors for its use, to determine whether and how often the mother tongue is used, and whether it facilitates FL learning and content acquisition. The results of this paper conclusively indicate that MT usage is a common practice that is widely accepted by FL learners, respectively used consciously, and planned as an intermediary and auxiliary language. Understanding how the mother tongue can interfere in FL learning and being aware of its influence during classroom activities can significantly enhance the acquisition of a second or third foreign language. The results of this research will help improve the teaching of foreign languages, which will enable easier and more efficient learning and successful acquisition of the foreign language.

Keywords: *mother tongue, foreign language, language use, teaching, students*

Introduction

Multilingualism is one of the leading principles of the European language policy. Europe attributes to the need for proficiency in several foreign languages, imposes linguistic diversity, encourages, and promotes multilingualism. As in many EU member countries, one of the goals of Macedonia's language policy is to maintain and develop multilingualism, through the acquisition of several foreign languages throughout formal compulsory education. Almost half of the total number of the educational systems in the EU require learning at least two languages simultaneously during a given period of their education. The timeline of learning two languages in N. Macedonia, as well as in Romania, Switzerland, Iceland, and Serbia is 8 years (European Commission, Eurydice, 2017, p. 34). Students start learning English as a compulsory subject at the age of 6, and at the age of 11 they are required to start a second foreign language, and they continue to learn two languages simultaneously until they reach the age of 19. (European Commission, Eurydice, 2017, p.160).

The educational system in N. Macedonia consists of *preschool* (1-5 years old) which is not compulsory, but most children attend it, then *primary school* - free and compulsory for all aged 6 to 14, regardless of gender, religion, and nationality, *secondary school* - offers an option to be completed in three or four years – compulsory and free for everyone aged 15 to 17/18 and *higher education* (Ministry of Education and Science of R. N. Macedonia, 2018, p.

12). In this paper, the authors focused on secondary education, specifically on the process of teaching and learning foreign languages in secondary schools in the country. In 11 countries at the EU level, more than 90% of students in the first year of secondary education are obliged to learn two or more FLs including Estonia, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Romania, Finland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Macedonia (European Commission, Eurydice, 2017, p.12). According to the data from the State Statistical Office of R. N. Macedonia (2022), at the beginning of the school year 2021/2022, there were a total of 129 secondary schools in the Republic of N. Macedonia, with a total of 71018 secondary school students. The study programs propose three foreign languages: first and second FL as compulsory subjects, and one elective FL.

According to the secondary education curricula proposed by the Bureau for Development of Education (2022) and the Center for Vocational Education and Training, approved by the Ministry of Education and Science (2018), the first and the second FL is taught for four years in general secondary schools and in vocational schools (especially economy-law and trade; economics, law and trade), while the third language is included as an elective subject only in general secondary schools during the third and the fourth year. English, German, French, and Russian are offered as the *first compulsory language*. According to the data from the State Statistical Office of R. N. Macedonia (2022) in the 2021-2022 school year, English is the *first compulsory language* for 70884 students, while German is learned by only 134 students. Apart from the above-mentioned languages, Turkish and Italian are offered as a *second compulsory language*. In this group, the German language is in the top position with 21226 learners, the second one is French with 14347 and then follow Italian (648), Turkish (522), Russian (156), and English (116). As a *third or elective foreign language*, 493 students have chosen *other language* which is different from those already listed, such as: Italian - 386 students, Turkish - 294, German - 117 and French - 6 students.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the topic of mother tongue (MT) usage in the foreign language (FL) classroom, consistently demonstrating the significant impact of mother tongue (MT) on the foreign language learning and teaching process. There is an ongoing discussion in the literature about whether to use the MT in foreign language classrooms. Many professionals have debated the advantages and disadvantages of using the MT. Some researchers, such as Burden (2001), Chick and McKay (1999), and Schweers (1999), believe that MT can be beneficial in FL classrooms, while others like Cianflone (2009) and Macdonald (1993) see it as an obstacle. On the other hand, another group of researchers, including Elridge (1996) and Voicu (2012), propose guidelines for when and how much MT should be used in the FL classrooms. They support the use of MT but with limitations.

Regarding the prevalence of Macedonian as a native language in foreign language teaching and learning in secondary schools, a research article titled "Teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching" was published in the international journal "Vospitanie". The study examined whether and how often teachers used the Macedonian language and what role and influence it had on the FL teaching process. The results showed that teachers were generally positively oriented towards the use of the MT in the FL classroom. They believed that the use of the MT facilitated the comprehension and acquisition of certain FL structures. However, how learners, i.e., high school students, experience the FL teaching with and without the use of their mother tongue will be clearly presented with the research results given below. This paper will enable the reader to understand the students' specific attitudes and will also highlight the reasons and factors for MT usage, then determine whether and how often the MT is used, as well as whether it facilitates the learning and the content acquisition.

Methodology: participants, research method, analysis, results and discussion

Participants

The survey involves a total of 127 high school students, out of which 70.1% are females and 29.9% are males. The participants are students from several public secondary schools in the Republic of N. Macedonia attending the fourth year of general and vocational high school.

Research method

For the purpose of the research, an anonymous online survey was created and conducted in Google Docs, aiming to cover as many students as possible from a number of different secondary schools in N. Macedonia. The questions and answers are given in Macedonian and in English, and the questionnaire contains 33 questions related to the students' perception and attitudes regarding the prevalence, usage, and role of the MT in FL classroom and their influence on the learning process and content acquisition. The survey is standardized, that is, the questions and their sequences are given in advance. It contains mixed questions, i.e., alternative (yes / no answers) and scaled questions (multiple answers given on a scale of 1-5 or ranging from "rarely-often" to "most often"). The survey was presented to all fourth-year students in several schools, but only those who willingly agreed to participate are included as respondents, ensuring that the results obtained are objective and valid. There was a set period of 1 month for submitting the response and all the samples that were timely submitted were fully summarized and analyzed respectively. The results of the research are presented along with the detailed discussion below, offering comprehensive insights into the findings. The questions of the survey, listed in Appendix A and the results, which are not presented in table format due to the varied responses, can be accessed for inspection online at:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1eBEhQtzK9EnQxruiNhjmcCPLXpnScCOFRJRmWiYnNSU/viewanalytics>. It is also important to mention that, in this paper, charts and diagrams are included specifically for those questions that require a visual representation to enhance the clarity of the responses.

Data analysis and results

The survey consists of 33 questions divided into two parts. The first 10 questions provide information about the prevalence of FLs in secondary schools and the usage of MT in FL classroom, demonstrating which languages are represented as first/second foreign language as a compulsory subject, and third foreign language as an elective subject. It can be clearly noted that the obtained results completely match the statistical data of the State Statistical Office for the school year 2021-2022; they reflect the actual FL position at the state level. The obtained data confirm that English is the first compulsory language for 98.4% of the respondents. German is the most common second compulsory language with 52.8%, while French comes next with 20.5%. As for a third or elective foreign language, about 50% of students chose *another language*, different from the ones already mentioned. Additionally, 90.6% of the respondents claim that they have been learning the first foreign language for 9 or more years, and they have been learning the second language for about 8 years. The data confirm the fact that in the Republic of N. Macedonia, the period of learning two languages lasts for 8 years, and the country has a tendency to maintain and develop multilingualism through formal compulsory education, thus responding to the EU demands and corresponding with the European language policy. Regarding the usage of MT in FL teaching and learning, about 90% of the students confirmed that they use the MT in first, second, or third foreign language classes.

The second part of the questionnaire, specifically questions 11 to 31, refers to the MT usage during the learning and acquisition of only the second/third FL. The responses to these questions clarify the students' perception and their specific attitudes towards its usage in the FL classroom, as well as the effects and outcomes of its implementation. The answers

provide solid information on whether and how often the students use their MT and whether, according to them, it facilitates the learning process as well as the content acquisition. Additionally, it also states how they truly experience the FL teaching and learning process with and without MT usage, and what the reasons and factors for using their MT in the process of learning and acquiring a second/third FL are.

Regarding the question, “*How often is the MT used in foreign language classes?*” 26.8% of the students use their mother tongue always, 38.6% often, 26% sometimes, and a very small percentage use it rarely or never. This demonstrates that using the MT is a common and accepted practice among FL learners.



Diagram 1

According to the research results, it is shown that 59.8% of the students use their MT as an intermediary or auxiliary language and 69.3% of them use it consciously and in a planned way, while 40.2% use it as a primary language and 30.7% use it unconsciously and spontaneously.

Regarding how students experience FL teaching and learning with and without the MT usage, 57.5% of the students do not feel uncomfortable and uncertain when the teacher speaks only in the foreign language and do not feel fear and insecurity when the teacher asks a question in the foreign language. Additionally, 78.7% of the respondents answered that they are not embarrassed to speak the foreign language with their teacher, and 70.9% claim that they are not ashamed of their classmates. This points out that the students feel comfortable to use the FL, they accept it as well, cope with it, and are not ashamed to use it in class.

Questions 18-22 were set to analyze the students' perceptions and attitudes regarding the MT usage in the FL teaching and learning process. Namely, 75.6% of the students agree that the MT helps them feel comfortable, safe and relaxed, 21.3% are not sure how they feel, and 3.1% disagree with this statement. Regarding the question, “*Do you think that the mother tongue has a crucial and necessary role in foreign language learning?*” 84.3% answered affirmatively. A total of 92.9% believe that the MT usage facilitates the FL learning and acquisition, 89% agree that better results are achieved if the MT is used in class, and 66.9% prefer to learn from materials and textbooks written exclusively in the FL. This indicates the fact that although the students believe that MT usage seems necessary for FL acquisition and that it facilitates the process, as well as that better results are achieved, a majority of them (66.9%) would still like and prefer to learn from materials and textbooks written only in the FL. Regarding the question, “*How often do you compare linguistic elements from the foreign language with elements from the mother tongue?*”, the students have different opinions and answers, presented through the following diagram:

23. Колку често правите споредба на јазичните елементи од странскиот јазик со елементи од мајчиниот јазик? - How often do you compare... language with elements from the mother tongue?
127 responses

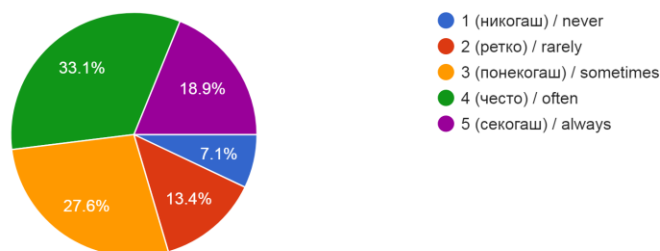


Diagram 2

As presented above, most students often, sometimes, or always compare language elements, only about 20% of them make a comparison rarely or never, and as expected, about 89% agree that it is very helpful for them when they compare the foreign language and their mother tongue. The results of the research indicate that a large number of the respondents (83.5%) prefer a teacher who explains the complex grammatical forms in Macedonian, and 76.4% of them believe that using the mother tongue helps them understand complex grammatical structures better and more easily. Furthermore, 84.3% of the respondents claimed that it is easier for them when the teacher translates unknown words literally, and 79.5% believe that their MT helps them understand new words, phrases, and expressions better. Additionally, a large number of respondents (66.9%) often compare the Macedonian spelling with the FL spelling.

As for the pronunciation of the foreign language, the students have varying opinions about whether having a native-speaker teacher would help them understand better. Approximately half of the students (57.5%) believe that it would be easier for them to understand the pronunciation from a native-speaker teacher, while about 42.5% disagree with that statement. These results clearly demonstrate the students' attitude towards the importance of using the MT in the FL teaching and learning process, and its influence on their understanding of the language elements. A large percentage of students, 92.9%, support the use of the MT in FL teaching and learning process. However, when it comes to how often they prefer to use the MT, the students have divided but almost equal opinions, as given in the following diagram:

31. Дали преферирате / сакате мајчиниот јазик да се употребува за време на часовите по странски јазик? - Do you prefer / want to use the mother tongue during the foreign language lessons?
127 responses

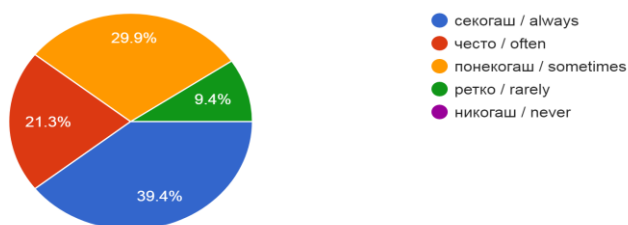


Diagram 3

Namely, nearly 39.4% of the respondents preferred the MT to be used always, 29.9% - sometimes, 21.3% - often, and only 9.4% - rarely. It is important to point out that none of the students responded with "never", meaning that they would not like the MT to be completely excluded from the teaching process.

In the 33rd question, the respondents were asked to express their views, opinions, ideas, suggestions, and recommendations regarding the use of the MT in the FL classroom. Below are presented some of the highlighted suggestions and recommendations given by the students:

- MT should be used, not always but often in order to explain unknown words and novelties in the language we are learning
- MT should not be used a lot;
- MT could be used exclusively for difficult and unknown words;
- MT should be used for translation and comparison;
- Always use the mother tongue;
- MT should be used because it facilitates learning;
- MT needs to be reduced to a minimum level and switch to foreign language discussions with all students as much as possible;
- MT should be used during foreign language classes because it is easier and faster for us to understand.

According to the students' views, the mother tongue should be used in order to explain unknown words and novelties in the FL, as well as for translation and comparison. However, certain care should be taken not to use it too frequently and excessively. It could be used exclusively for difficult and unfamiliar words. Nevertheless, the MT should always be used because it facilitates the learning and acquisition of a foreign language. According to them, the use of the MT during foreign language classes can be useful because it helps them to understand and learn the foreign language faster, easier, and better.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to determine the students' perceptions and attitudes towards mother tongue usage in the FL classroom and its impact on the process of learning and content acquisition. The research was carried out by surveying a total of 127 fourth-year secondary school students in general and vocational high school (economy-law and trade; economics, law and trade) from several public secondary schools in the R.N. Macedonia. The results obtained from our research realistically reflect the situation and completely coincide with the State Statistical Office's data given for the academic year 2021-2022. The results data confirm that students learn foreign languages for an interval of 8-9 years and that English is the first compulsory language for 98.4% of our respondents, German is the second compulsory language for 52.8%, followed by French for 20.5%. Based on the results, it can be concluded that using the mother tongue is a common practice that is widely accepted by FL learners. Most of them use the mother tongue consciously and in a planned way as an intermediary or auxiliary language. However, they do not feel discomfort, insecurity, or fear, and are not ashamed to use the foreign language. Therefore, they prefer to learn from textbooks written only in a foreign language. According to our research, most students compare the foreign language elements such as spelling, vocabulary, and pronunciation with their mother tongue. A large part of them prefers complex structures to be explained in Macedonian because they believe it helps them to understand complex grammatical structures, new words, phrases, and expressions better and more easily. Therefore, the students have divided opinions about whether having a native-speaker teacher would help them or not. Although students support the use of the mother tongue when learning and acquiring a foreign language, they still think it should be used occasionally, only and exclusively for translation, comparison, and explaining unknown words. None of the students would like the Macedonian language, as a mother tongue, to be completely excluded from the teaching process because they believe that the mother tongue usage makes the FL learning, comprehension, and acquisition much easier, better, and faster. From the aforementioned, it can be concluded that despite the modernization of the educational process and the aspiration to apply innovative teaching methods that imply the full and exclusive use of the foreign language, this still cannot be achieved in upper secondary schools in the N. Macedonia because the students still need the mother tongue

as a necessary tool. The results of this research will contribute to the improvement of the FL *teaching* process and in facilitating the FL *learning* process, leading to easier and more efficient learning and successful acquisition of the foreign language.

References

- Burden, P. (2001). When do native English speakers and Japanese college students disagree about the use of Japanese in the English conversation classroom? *The Language Teacher*, April 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2001/04/burden> (October, 2021).
- Bureau for Development of Education (2022). Secondary education. [online]. [24.02.2023]. Available at: https://www.bro.gov.mk/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8/?idcat=7&customposttype=document_s_category
- Bureau for Development of Education (2022). Four-year secondary vocational education. [online]. [24.02.2023]. Available at: https://www.bro.gov.mk/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8/?idcat=16&customposttype=document_s_category
- Bureau for Development of Education (2022). High school education. [online]. [24.02.2023]. Available at: https://www.bro.gov.mk/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8/?idcat=13&customposttype=document_s_category
- Chick, M. and McKay, S. (1999). Teaching English in multiethnic schools in the Durban area: the promotion of multilingualism or monolingualism? Retrieved from <http://www.und.ac.za/und/ling/archive/chic-04.html>. (October, 2021).
- Cianflone, E. (2009). L1 use in English courses at university level. *ESP World*, 8(22), 1-6.
- Eldridge, J. (1996). Code-switching in a Turkish secondary school. *ELT Journal*, 50(4), 303-311. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/50.4.303>
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017). Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe. Eurydice report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. [online]. [26.02.2023]. Available at: http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/73ac5ebd-473e-11e7-aea8-01aa75ed71a1.0012.01/DOC_1
- Macdonald, C. (1993). *Using the Target Language*. Cheltenham: Mary Glasgow.
- Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia (2018). Education strategy 2018-2025 and action plan. [online]. [25.02.2023]. Available at: <http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategija-za-obrazovanie-MAK-WEB.pdf>
- Schweers, W. Jr. (1999). Using L1 in the L2 classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 37(2), 6-9
- State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia (2022). Primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia at the beginning of the school year 2021/2022. [online]. [24.02.2023]. Available at: https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2022/2.1.22.09_mk.pdf
- State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia (2022). The number of students in the regular upper secondary schools at the beginning of the school year 2021/2022. [online]. [24.02.2023]. Available at: <https://www.stat.gov.mk/OblastOpsto.aspx?id=5>
- Voicu, C. G. (2012). Overusing mother tongue in English language teaching. *International Journal of Communication Research*, 2(3), 212-218.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. Gender
2. How many foreign languages do you study in the fourth year?
3. Which language are you learning as your **first** foreign language?
4. Which language are you learning as your **second** foreign language?
5. Which language are you learning as your **third** foreign language?
6. How many years have you been learning your **first** foreign language?
7. How many years have you been learning your **second** foreign language?
8. How many years have you been learning your **third** foreign language?
9. Do you use your mother tongue in your **first** foreign language classes?
10. Do you use your mother tongue in your **second (and third)** foreign language classes?
11. How often is the mother tongue used in foreign language classes?
12. When I learn a foreign language, I use my mother tongue as: primary language or intermediary / auxiliary language.
13. I use my mother tongue: consciously and planned or unconsciously and spontaneously.
14. Do you feel uncomfortable and insecure when the teacher speaks only in a foreign language?
15. Do you feel fear and insecurity when the teacher asks you a question in a foreign language?
16. Are you embarrassed in front of the teacher when you have to speak in a foreign language?
17. Are you embarrassed in front of your classmates when you have to speak in a foreign language?
18. My mother tongue helps me feel comfortable, secure and relaxed.
19. Do you think that the mother tongue has a crucial and necessary role in foreign language learning?
20. Do you think that using your mother tongue makes it easier for you to learn and acquire a foreign language?
21. Do you agree that better results are achieved if the mother tongue is used in your foreign language classes?
22. Do you prefer to learn from materials / textbooks that are written only in a foreign language?
23. How often do you compare linguistic elements from the foreign language with elements from the mother tongue?
24. Do you find it helpful if you compare the foreign language and the mother tongue?
25. Do you prefer the teacher to explain the complex grammatical forms in Macedonian?
26. My mother tongue helps me understand complex grammatical structures better and easier.
27. Do you think that you will understand the pronunciation more easily if the foreign language teacher is a native speaker?
28. Do you often compare Macedonian spelling with the foreign language spelling?
29. Is it easier for you when the teacher literally translates the unknown words for you?
30. My mother tongue helps me better understand new words, phrases and expressions.
31. Do you prefer / want to use the mother tongue during the foreign language lessons?
32. Are you for or against the use of the mother tongue in foreign language classes?
33. Any suggestions about the use of the mother tongue in the foreign language classes.