Differences in Strategy Use among Students of English or German as a Foreign Language

Katerina Vlckova, Miroslav Janik
Institute for Research in School Education, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
vlckova@ped.muni.cz

Learning strategies
- crucial concept in the theory of SLA since the 1960s
- capture a wide range of linguistic behaviours
- operations to acquire, retain, retrieve or perform (Rigney 1978)
- sets of conscious thoughts and actions that a learner takes to achieve a learning goal (Chamot 2004)
- connected with self-regulation, metacognition, learning style, cognitive style
- strategy choice and use is influenced by different variables like gender, experience, motivation, or proficiency

Strategy classification
- most often classified according to psychological functions - cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective (O'Malley, Chamot 1990), or 4 language skills (Cohen, Weaver 2006)

In our research, Oxford's (1990) classification is used:
- direct (memory, cognitive, compensatory)
- indirect (metacognitive, affective, social)

Research question
Does the use of learner strategies differ according to the acquired foreign language (English or German)?

Research sample
- pupils from the Czech Republic
- 1482 pupils at the end of primary education
- 2384 pupils at the end of lower secondary comprehensive education
- 1038 students at the end of upper secondary comprehensive education

Methods
- adapted, enlarged inventory SILL (Oxford 1990)
- for primary pupils: 28 items with a 3-point frequency scale (α=.74)
- for lower (α=.90) and upper (α =.80) secondary students a 5-point scale for 67 items
- strategy use in a preferred FL (mostly English)

Results
Differences in overall strategy use
- only at primary level (pupils learning English used strategies more than pupils learning German

Differences among strategy groups
- lower secondary pupils learning German reported using memory, affective, and social strategies more than pupils learning English - relations significant but extremely weak (R > 0.05)
- upper secondary students preferring English tended to use more cognitive strategies, and students who preferred German used more memory and affective

Differences in single strategy use
- students differed in the use of some single strategies

- At primary level sign. differences in the use of 13 of 29 strategies. Pupils learning English practise more, learn more regulary, more often attend special courses, watch movies and listen songs. Pupils learning German guess the meaning.
- Secondary pupils learning English practised more phonetics and orthographpy, phrases, tried more to understand without translating, used gestures, etc. Pupils learning German used more analytical approach to learning (cognitive, memory strategies), focused more on mistakes, language stress.

Discussion
Differences between students learning German and English are based on the differences between the language systems as well as on the differences between the didactics.
Pupils encouter more problems learning German therefore they use more affective and social strategies.
Memorising in German seems to be a problem of differences in didactics.