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**Faculty of Letters and Arts**

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# Summary of the PhD Thesis

## The German Language in German Minority Schools in Romania in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Sibiu

2015

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Key words: automatism, chunks, first language acquisition, German language, input, interview, questionnaire, research methods, second language acquisition, students, teachers, 2L1

### 1. Motivation for choosing the theme

The establishment of the German communities beginning with the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Romania brought significant changes in the evolution of the school system. From the moment when the German minority founded their own school system, the German language became the second most used language especially in Transylvania, where these German groups settled. Over the centuries this German school system developed and imposed itself upon the Romanian society. After the massive emigration at the end of the Communist regime, the German school system did not vanish but the German students were replaced by Romanian ones, eager to learn German on a native speaker level. Nevertheless, the teaching and learning content remained the same, which was very similar to the one in Germany, but the only difference was that back then the students were German native speakers and nowadays the students come from Romanian families and speak German only during the school program. Even under these conditions, the graduated students of a German school are considered to be “German native speakers”. This paper aims to analyze the level of the German language at the students of two of the best German secondary schools and high schools in Romania, “Samuel von Brukenthal” in Sibiu and “Nikolaus Lenau” in Timisoara.

I chose this theme because I realized as a teacher at “Samuel von Brukenthal” secondary school and high school that the students have difficulties in expressing their ideas in a spontaneous conversation, although they began with the learning process in kindergarten, and set forth in school, which means that from their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of life they were constantly at least four hours a day in contact with the German language. According to Goethe institute for learning the German language, a learner may reach the level C1, that is the next level after a native speaker, after 800-1000 classes of 45 minutes, which means that these students must have reached C1 at the middle of the second grade, since they were around four hours per day in contact with the German language. By means of this paper, I analyzed the factors, which prevented those students from developing the expected language skills after twelve years of studying in a German school.

## 2. The composition of the paper

This paper contains ten chapters, while the last chapter represents the bibliography.

Chapter 1 makes an introduction to the theme, presenting the aim and the structure of the paper. Each chapter is shortly described and it is mentioned that at the end of the paper, the readers may find a CD contain the transcripts of the interviewed students and teachers.

Chapter 2, *A Short Description of the German School System in Romania*, describes the system of the German school in Romania and offers a parallel to the one in Germany. In this chapter parts of the curriculum in both countries are compared, in order to emphasize the similarities between the two school systems.

Chapter 3, *Presentation of the Actual Stadium in the Research Field*, refers to the actual stadium of the research in this domain and mentions the studies of Sorin Gădeanu and Liana Iunesch, who dealt with the linguistic deficiencies of the students from the university respectively from the primary school. Sorin Gădeanu mentions the lack of confidence at the students at the university regarding their language skills in German, although they graduated a German high school. On the other hand Liana Iunesch notices that the teachers in the primary school are not professionally prepared to teach German as a foreign language, because the system assumes that the students master the German language when they enter the primary school. This paper represents the bond between the two mentioned studies, because it analyses the students from the secondary school and from high school, in order to see what happens to their language skills between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Chapter 4, *Research Methods and Instruments*, offers a presentation of the research methods, by means of which the level of the German language at these students can be determined. This theme cannot resume either to quantitative methods or to qualitative methods, therefore a triangulation of methods is more appropriate to establish the language level. This chapter describes the methods, which can be applied to acquire the necessary data from the students or from the teachers of a German school, in order to see if we can longer speak of a native speaker level concerning their German language skills. It is important not to take the students and the teacher out of their milieu during the research because the results will be altered, if they are not accustomed with the surroundings. The researcher must take several aspects into account when

using the empirical methods of collecting data, since he is not gathering information to a certain topic but he is analyzing the language level of the participants, which can be easily influenced if the attitude of the researcher is not appropriate.

By means of the empirical research methods like the interview and the questionnaire, the researcher can observe if there is a language feel, the so called “sprachgefühl”, at the students and at the teachers of a German school. This kind of research will not resort to standardized language tests, because the aim of this analysis is to see how developed their feeling for this language is, and not necessarily their ability to write essays and to skim texts. These methods should simulate a daily context, in which these participants are forced to use their language skills without having the necessary time to think their grammar structures through. It is interesting to see if those participants, who are called by the Romanian society German native speakers, are able to use the German language without feeling the constant need to search for words or to come up with the Romanian equivalents, if the German ones are missing. The first method is the observation, in which the students are analyzed in their learning milieu. This method should indicate how often do they engage to say something and how their language skills are trained during classes. With the help of the interview the statements of the students and of the teachers were analyzed not only quantitatively, by means of statistics, but also qualitatively, because they explained why their parents wanted them to go to a German school. The questionnaire is an important method to determine their linguistic context. The students and the teachers had to mention the language they use in the social contexts, described in the questionnaire. In order to determine the factors, which hindered a successful language acquisition, it is important to see in what social context is the languages used and how often. The research involves also the teachers, because they are actually the primary source of linguistic input, and it is necessary to see how often do the teachers come in contact with the colloquial German language. Anton Zollner, a German writer from Banat, noticed in his writings that the German school system in Romania is in decline, because there are no longer German native speakers amongst the teachers. He emphasizes that the German language at a native speaker level cannot be taught by Romanian teachers, who speak German, thus it is very difficult to speak today about the German language taught in the German minority schools. In this perspective I considered important to approach the teachers to see on the one hand their approach to the linguistic situation of their students, and on the other hand to analyze their own linguistic development by means of the questionnaire. The

last applied method is the language test, which should indicate in what aspects of the language do these students have more difficulties, in order to determine the factors, which led to these linguistic deficiencies.

Chapter 5, *The Empirical Part*, describes the empirical research and its results. Each research method, which was mentioned in the previous chapter, is now described in accordance with the performed research and interpreted by means of the obtained results. The first method was observation, which was applied not only to students but also to teachers. In the assistance hours it was noticed that the students give monosyllabic answers in German and the teachers are content to see that the students learned the lesson. The teaching methods are still based on the structure: the teacher asks and the students replies, which means that during classes the students do not develop their language skills, because the German language is only supposed to represent the means by which the teachers verify the content of the lesson.

During the interview the students showed how difficult is for them, to express themselves in German on topics of their daily life. The majority of the students could not formulate a sentence without making evident grammatical errors. The only students which could talk fluently were the ones coming from German families, i.e. the true native speakers, but these students represent only 10% from the entire number of students from a German school in Romania. Although the teachers are aware of the linguistic deficiencies of their students, they do not take measures to improve their language skills. The teachers for specific subjects leave this responsibility to the German teachers, and the German teachers have to follow the curriculum, in order to prepare the students for the national exams: at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. When the teachers were asked to think, how they could improve the language skills of their students, the majority responded that the students must read more books in German in their free time, thus pushing this responsibility again away from them.

In completion to the results obtained by means of the interviews, come the questionnaire, which was filled out not only by the students but also by the teachers. The questionnaire described different social contexts, in which the asked one, had to mention the language they use in those particular situations. The majority of the students use very rarely German outside the classes. Moreover, more than half of the teachers come from Romanian families, which means that they learned German under the same conditions as their students. In this perspective, the teachers have the tendency to stick to the content of their lesson, without deviating from it, because they

do not feel comfortable to talk in German about common things. The difference between the results of the students and of the teachers at the questionnaires, was that the teachers try to maintain their contact with the German language also outside the classes, by reading books or listening to German TV-shows or watching German movies, while the students do not search for means to remain in contact with the German language. Therefore, the only source for German input remains the school, where they receive a near academic input and not an input for training their language skills.

The last research method is the language test given to the students, in order to see, which aspects of the language pose them problems. The exercise, where they had to name different objects, which they come across in their daily life, like: keychain, coat hanger, ceiling, and so on, proved to be the most difficult to solve, because they do not use such words in school. Their language basis was formed in the primary school and once entering the secondary school, they do not come across such daily words anymore, because each subject has its own terminology. Even in the German classes they learn different aspects of the literature and deal with the meta-language in Grammar, since they are considered to be native speakers of German. At other exercises the students made a lot of grammar errors as well, because they learn the grammar rules but they do not develop the so called "sprachgefühl", which allows them to formulate sentences without making a great cognitive effort.

Chapter 6, *Factors for a Successful Second Language Acquisition*, presents different theories concerning the language acquisition, in order to see what factors are necessary to guarantee a successful language acquisition. Regarding the students of the German schools in Romania, it is interesting to see what factors were not taken into consideration during the learning process, since they cannot speak fluently after so many years with four hours a day exposure to the German language. The starting point in analyzing the language acquisition relies in the availability of the Universal Grammar. The idea of Universal Grammar was put forward by Noam Chomsky, who states that there is an innate knowledge in the mind of the human beings, which is based upon a set of principles embodied in all languages. Chomsky leads his theory beginning with the first language acquisition, where he can easily prove that children unaware of any grammar rules come to formulate correct sentences at a fragile age.<sup>1</sup> However his theory is disputed when it comes to the second language acquisition, since the second language is

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<sup>1</sup> Chomsky, Noam (2002). *On Nature and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



clearly acquired through the first language and then the existence of the Universal Grammar in the second language acquisitions remains questionable.

Another important factor which influences the second language acquisition is the age of attainment. Based on Lenneberg's hypothesis concerning the critical period of the language attainment, several attitudes towards the age factor were developed.<sup>2</sup> Some researchers sustain the idea that the sooner the learner begins to acquire the language, the better will be his language skills, while other reject the age factor completely, arguing that only the quality of the input and the language exposure can be determinant factors in the second language acquisition. This controversial issue is explained in more details in the second chapter.

The last part of this chapter aims to illustrate to what extent does the quality of the input and the exposure to language influence the learning process. This issue is related to the age factor as well, because it is interesting to see if an adult and a child exposed to the target language in the same manner have different results. Nevertheless, the exposure to language is an important aspect to take into consideration, but can this factor lead to a native- like language competence? Based on some studies, this chapter tries to give an answer to this question.

Chapter 7, *Errors in second language acquisition*, mentions the barriers which hinders a successful second language acquisition. Since many linguists stated that it is almost impossible to reach a native speaker level in second language acquisition, they came up with another category for the ultimate attainment and this is "near native speaker level", which means that the learner can be easily taken for a native speaker, especially in the cases of the immigrants, who are leaving for so many years in the country with the target language, but in specific social contexts they cannot show a native speaker behavior. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to reach the level of a near native speaker, if the learner is not living the country, where the target language is spoken. This chapter is based on the Bleyhl's list of errors in second language acquisition, in order to see why the students of the German schools in Romania still have severe difficulties in expressing spontaneously their ideas, although they have so many years with daily exposure to language behind them.<sup>3</sup> The common error is the focus on form, because the teachers neglect the principal role of language, an that is to communicate. Moreover, the students of the German schools in Romania learn about the language and not how to communicate with the help of the language.

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<sup>2</sup> Lenneberg, E. (1967). *Biological foundations of language*. New York: Wiley.

<sup>3</sup> Bleyhl, Werner. (2006) Die Defizite des traditionellen Fremdsprachenunterrichts oder Weshalb-endlic.ein Paradigmenwechsel, eine Umkehr im Fremdsprachenunterricht erfolgen muss. In: *Storyline Approach and Language Teaching*. S.9

Chapter 8, *Aspects of the learning process in second language acquisition*, comes in addition to the previous chapter, offering solutions for a successful second language acquisition. This chapter focuses upon the importance of fixed structures, called chunks, in second language acquisition. It is emphasized that isolated words combined with the grammar rules do not lead to a successful language acquisition, because in a spontaneous conversation, the learner has no time to check the grammar rules, and he will build up sentences with the topic of his mother tongue. These fixed structures must be learned by repetition, until they turn into an automatism. With the help of these automatisms the learner can express his ideas without making a big cognitive effort.

Chapter 9 presents the conclusion, which are drawn out from the empirical and theoretical research. The students coming from Romanian families, who represent the majority, have difficulties in expressing their ideas in German, although they began their language acquisition in kindergarten and set forth in school, being exposed at least four hours a day to the German language. The contact with the German language is limited to the teaching classes, where they are provided only with specific terminology, thus these students do not use German as a means of communication but as a means of transferring information. In this case the quantity of input is of no importance and the quality of input plays an important role in their language acquisition. After graduating the primary school, the students do not come across daily vocabulary anymore, and they cannot train their language skills under these conditions. They use the German language passively by receiving a great amount of information in German. The students associate the German language with the school and after classes they do not want to remain in contact with the language.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to find a category for their language level, since they do not reach a native speaker level, not even a near native speaker level, but their language skills are much more better than a L2 learner. The fact that they began with the language acquisition at the age of three and had a continuity in their learning process represented an advantage compared to the one, who began with the acquisition later on without being exposed daily to the target language.

The German language in German minority schools in Romania is rather an academic language or an education language, by means of which different subjects are taught. The German school system leaves from the premise, that these students master the German language,

therefore the teachers do not have the interest to develop their language skills. Moreover, the teachers are not trained to teach their subjects with methods, that could improve the language skills of the students. Furthermore there is a gap between the perspective of the parents concerning the German school and the perspective of the German school system: the parents send their children to German schools, so that they can learn German on a higher level, and the German school system assumes that the students master the German language, if they chose to come to a German school. This discrepancy is reflected in the linguistic deficiencies of the students.

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