

Path to Success or Failure in Foreign Language Speaking

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Abstract: The article contributes to the research field on the development of speaking in a foreign language. It presents the results of a survey conducted at the University of Defence in Brno. The survey was designed to identify differences between two groups of fifty students with different levels of their speaking skill in English, corresponding to A1 and B1 levels in terms of the CEFR. The participants were interviewed in Czech about their previous language achievements, motivation to learn English and their experience of learning English. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using inferential and descriptive statistics. The outcomes have shown that the groups differed significantly in the type of school the students had studied at prior to the university, the grades they had achieved in their secondary school leaving examinations in English Language and Czech Language and Literature, and the degree of their motivation to learn English. Furthermore, the analysis of the students' opinions on the development of their speaking skill in English has revealed that successful foreign language speakers actively seek opportunities to speak in the foreign language, and attribute their success to factors within their control, which is not the case of the unsuccessful ones. The author proposes that undergraduates with low foreign language skills should be detected and interviewed in their native language when they enter university to reflect on their language learning experience, and encouraged to resume responsibility for their language skills development.

Key words: English language, good language learner, interdependence hypothesis, Maturita Examination, motivation, NATO STANAG 6001 Examination, proficiency, speaking skill

Introduction

Speaking has always attracted attention of teachers and researchers. Burns and Joyce (1997) defined speaking as an interactive process of making meaning that includes producing, receiving and processing information. Developing speaking in a foreign language takes time, since there are many essential prerequisites to master, namely a certain level of listening comprehension, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, functions, fluency and communication skills. Practising speaking skills in a foreign language is a challenging task, especially in the countries where the foreign language is not widely spoken, such as in the Czech Republic. Consequently, some Czech students enter universities with an insufficiently developed English language speaking skill (ELSS), and then experience difficulties in meeting the objectives set by their study programs.

The problem is that these students fail to comply with the goals set for the exit levels in their first foreign language in primary and secondary education. In terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), pupils leaving basic schools should achieve at least elementary

level, or A2, and graduates from Specialized and Grammar schools should reach at least intermediate levels, B1 or B2, respectively (MSMT, 2017, p. 22; MSMT, 2022). The students who achieve at least the B1 level before entering universities might be, to a certain extent, considered good language learners, and the examination of their learning path might provide educators with valuable information about their acquisition of ELSS.

This is the reason why this study aimed to examine the language learning paths of students at two different levels of their ELSS, namely A1 and B1 in terms of the CEFR, among students at the University of Defence (UoD) in Brno. The study compared the types of schools the students had studied at prior to the university, their grades in secondary school leaving examinations in English and Czech, and the degree of their motivation to learn English. In addition to that, the participants' perspectives on their English language learning experience were processed and compared between both groups.

The design of this study was inspired by the concept of a good language learner (Rubin 1975), and the variables were selected with respect to the factors that could be related to the development of foreign language speaking.

Literature review

The concept of a *good language learner* was introduced by Rubin (1975), developed by Naiman et al. (1978), and revisited several times since then (e.g., Reiss et al., 1983; Naiman, 1996; Griffiths, 2015). In her first work, Rubin (1975) explored three variables on which good language learning depends: *aptitude, motivation and opportunity*. They present the main concepts on which also our variables depend.

Language aptitude, the ability to acquire languages, is difficult to define. Carroll (1960) considered aptitude “a relatively invariant characteristic of the individual, not subject to easy modification by learning” (p. 38, as cited in Rubin, 1975). Others insisted that that language aptitude could be improved through training (Politzer & Weiss, 1969) and motivation (Rizvanovic, 2018). Thus, language aptitude is often used interchangeably with other terms, such as talent, giftedness, language learning ability or even sometimes with language learning expertise. Some researchers have suggested that aptitude designates the innate property that develops into a certain skill, which is then termed talent (Gagné, 2005; Stern & Neubauer, 2013). However, nowadays, a commonly held view is that language aptitude is a more dynamic, multi-faceted conglomerate of various cognitive skills (Dörnyei, 2006) that can, under certain circumstances, be altered through practice (Singleton, 2017), as cited by Ameringer et al. (2018, p. 7). Language aptitude is associated with language achievements. Ganschow et al. (1998), for example, conducted research which showed that high school students who achieved higher

grades in a foreign language had significantly stronger language aptitude skills than students who achieved lower grades in a foreign language. This is the reason why this study considered secondary school leaving examinations in native and foreign languages.

Another reason justifying the selection of the variables concerning the achievements in Czech and English language is centered around the theories stating that competencies established in a native language will transfer across languages. They stem from the linguistic interdependence hypothesis which states that language and literacy skills can be transferred from one language to another (Cummins, 1979), and the Common Underlying Proficiency Model (CUP) in which the aspects of a bilingual's proficiency in a native and foreign language are seen as common or interdependent across languages (Cummins, 1981). The interdependence hypothesis was further supported by Sparks et al. (2009) who provided evidence for a long-term crosslinguistic transfer of native language to foreign language skills.

Motivation is an important factor for explaining the success or failure of any complex task. According to Gardner (1985), motivation is the combination of attempt plus desire to obtain the aim of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language. Oxford and Shearin (1994) defined motivation as a desire to gain an objective, combined with the energy to work towards that objective. They present many reasons for studying different aspects of motivation and provide suggestions on how to enhance motivation in learners. Tremblay and Gardner (1995) prove that there are relationships among motivational constructs and achievement. Numerous studies confirm that motivation plays a crucial role in language acquisition (Dörnyei, 1998, 2001) and that there is still space for expanding the motivation construct in language learning (Prevratilova, 2020). Recent studies point out the importance of motivation in developing a learner's capacity to be autonomous in the process of language learning (Nemethova, 2020; Rozsypalkova & Brzobohata, 2020; Yabukoshi, 2020). Thus motivation became one of the variables in this research study.

Rubin (1975) explains that while it is generally agreed that the best language learning occurs in the country where the language is spoken, good language learners seem to have a high motivation to communicate, no matter where they are. In her view, good language learners seek the *opportunities* to use the language, are willing to take a certain amount of risk in terms of making mistakes, attend to the form and meaning by constantly analysing, categorizing and synthesizing, and monitor their own speech and the speech of others. She asserts that the teacher must find the means to help the student help himself, when the teacher is not around (p. 45). Griffiths (2015) elaborates on the concept by offering lessons from good language learners in terms of their *aptitude, personality, learning style, strategies, motivation, metacognition, autonomy* and others. She suggests that more

empirical research needs to be conducted to examine variables that lead to good language learning. This study attempts to identify factors influencing success or failure in foreign language speaking.

Speaking performance was studied, for example, by Alrasheedi (2020), who was examining factors influencing speaking performance of Saudi English language learners. Based on a questionnaire, his study identified decisive *personal factors* impacting students' performance in speaking skills: shyness, peer pressure, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. Other factors that hinder speaking performance were *paucity of necessary vocabulary*, *lack of exposure to the target language*, and *scarce opportunities* to practice speaking outside the classroom. Some researchers emphasized a decisive role of the overall foreign language *proficiency* in the development of speaking skills (e.g., Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002; Bozorgian, 2012; Berman, 2016; Kostikova et al., 2019). Tutoring experience and internal statistics results at the UoD confirm that learners with well-developed listening and literacy skills reach the required level in ELSS with less effort than learners with low level of these skills (Hruby & Stankova, 2020).

By and large, literature review indicates that numerous studies have been examining various factors related to good language learners. However, most of them are preoccupied with literacy skills, and empirical studies focusing on speaking are relatively scarce. Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute to the research field of speaking in a foreign language by comparing native and foreign language achievements, motivation and language learning experience in successful and unsuccessful foreign language speakers in university students.

Purpose of the research

The initial impetus for designing this study came from the desire to gain an insight into language education background and learning experience of students at the UoD to find out some indicators determining their success in speaking in English. The following paragraphs explain English language requirements and research focus at the Language Centre, UoD.

In general, military personnel in NATO member states are required to reach a standardized level of proficiency in the English language according to their position in the Czech Armed Forces. They have to demonstrate the required level in the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination. The descriptors for six language proficiency levels are stated in the document NATO STANDARD A TrainP-5 (BILC, 2020). The guidelines for language curriculum, test development, and for recording and reporting Standardized Language Profiles (SLP) of military personnel are provided by Bureau for International Language Coordination (BILC, 2020).

Currently, students at the University of Defence take their first NATO STANAG 6001 Examination in all four language skills in their first semester. They can regularly retake the exam in all skills once a year. If they reach the required level in two skills at least, they can retake only the skills in which they did not succeed. At the end of the sixth semester, they have to achieve at least intermediate level in English in all four language skills, expressed as SLP 2222 for listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, respectively. This level, named the functional level in terms of the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination, is comparable to B1. Those who fail to achieve this goal have to leave the UoD. The dropouts present unwanted losses in the Czech Armed Forces, since they are already well-trained military professionals who might have reasonable prospects of becoming experts in their field of study.

This is the main reason why English language educators at the University of Defence (UoD) in Brno have been paying a sustained attention to monitoring students' SLPs. The latest students' SLP results serve as the criterion for the replacement of students in their study groups. In addition, UoD researchers focus on identifying the skills with the lowest performance level and search for the ways of facilitating their development. Statistics, regularly performed at the end of each semester, and research studies indicate that the most difficult skills for students to master are writing and speaking (Hruby & Stankova, 2020); therefore, UoD language teachers and researchers are preoccupied with students' development in writing and speaking. This study is a part of a project aimed at tracking students' progress in developing their English language speaking skill. The paper presents partial results that focus on the differences between two groups of students with different levels of their ELSS assessed in their first semester at the UoD.

Concepts

Since the study examines only a limited number of variables in students who did not succeed or succeeded at achieving B1 level in ELSS after 11–12 years of their English language study at basic and secondary schools, there is not sufficient justification for terming them *bad/good language learners*. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, narrower terms, *unsuccessful/successful EL speakers*, are introduced.

Unsuccessful EL speakers are the UoD students who had achieved Level 1 (L1) in ELSS according to the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination (BILC, 2020) by the time when they were the subjects of the research. Their results of other language skills varied from L1 to L2. At the UoD, they present at-risk students, i.e., the students who have a high probability of dropping out of the UoD for failing to meet the requirements of English language courses and achieving SLP 2222 by the end of their sixth semester. The descriptors for L1 in ELSS are presented in Appendix 1.

Approximately, L1 corresponds to level A1 in terms of the CEFR. In this study, the unsuccessful EL speakers constitute research group 1 (G1).

Successful EL speakers are the UoD students who had achieved level 2 (L2) in ELSS according to the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination (BILC, 2020) by the time when they became the subjects of the research. Their results of other language skills were assessed as L2. The descriptors for L2 in ELSS are presented in Appendix 1. Approximately, L2 corresponds to level B1 in terms of the CEFR. In this study, the successful EL speakers constitute research group 2 (G2). In general, G2 represent students at higher level of proficiency in EL than G1.

Grammar Schools include four-, six- and eight-year secondary schools. Their study programs aim at acquiring general knowledge with the prospect of continuing studies at universities. *Specialized Schools* are other secondary education institutions than Grammar Schools whose graduates take Maturita Examination (Vocational Schools and Follow-up Schools).

Maturita Examination in English Language (MATURITA in EL) is a school leaving examination at secondary schools (CERMAT, 2019). It is a facultative exam consisting of a didactic test comprising listening and reading, and an oral and written part that is not compulsory.

Maturita Examination in Czech Language and Literature (MATURITA in CLL) is a school leaving examination at secondary schools. It is a compulsory exam consisting of a didactic test, comprising the use of Czech and reading comprehension, and an oral and written part. The scores for the standardized didactic tests of both exams are reported annually in the document Maturitni zkouska 2013–2021 (CERMAT, 2019).

Motivation for learning the English language (MOTIV for EL) stands for the students' self-reported evaluation of their motivation to learn English on the scale 1–10, with 10 being the highest grade.

Research aim

The research focused on identifying differences between successful and unsuccessful English language speakers. Based on literature research and observation in classes, the variables in which the author expected the successful and unsuccessful English language speakers might differ were selected as follows:

1. the type of the secondary school at which they studied before entering the UoD,
2. the grade in the Maturita Examination in English Language,
3. the grade in the Maturita Examination in Czech Language and Literature,

4. self-reported motivation for learning the English language on the scale 1–10.

In addition to that, the strength of the associations among variables 2–4 was determined. Besides, students' opinions on their language learning experience and reasons for their success or failure in meeting the requirement to achieve level 2 in speaking in English in the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination were gathered and analysed.

Research questions

Q1: In which variables (1–4) do the unsuccessful and successful EL speakers differ significantly?

Q2: What are the associations among variables 2–4?

Q3: What are the students' opinions on

- a) the causes of the level of their ELSS?
- b) their shortcomings in ELSS?
- c) what the UoD teachers should do to improve their ELSS?

Methods and procedures

The selection of appropriate methods proceeded from the reference books on research in language learning and teaching (Brown, 2004; Mackey & Gass, 2008; Nunan, 2008). The data were collected through a *semi-structured interview*. To answer Q1 and Q2, quantitative research methods were used, namely *percentage comparison*, *T-Test* and *Pearson's correlation*; to answer Q3, *content analysis* was applied. The interviews were conducted in the years 2018–2020, and the results were processed and discussed in 2021.

Participants

The research sample consisted of one hundred Czech students attending the UoD, the Faculty of Leadership and the Faculty of Military Technology, in Brno. They were chosen at random as volunteers and gave express consent to the participation in the research.

To obtain data for a comparative study, two groups of fifty participants were formed according to the level of their speaking skills in English: G1 (L1 in ELSS) and G2 (L2 in ELSS). The levels had been assessed by the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination (BILC, 2020) using a two-level test designed to achieve Standard Proficiency Levels (SLP) 1–2.

The students had taken the examination prior to the research, more precisely, in their first semester at the UoD, and the result of their ELSS remained the same by the time when they were interviewed. Since it was impossible to reach 50 L1 respondents within one academic year because their occurrence is relatively low, the interviews were conducted within two years 2018–2020, and included both first- and second-year students. The characteristics of both groups are presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1: *Characteristics of the research sample*

Characteristics	G1 (<i>n</i> = 50)	G2 (<i>n</i> = 50)
ELSS	L1	L2
Men	38 (76%)	42 (84%)
Women	12 (24%)	8 (16%)
Length of EL study	11–12 years	11–12 years

Note:

- G1 stands for Group 1, G2 stands for Group 2.
- ELSS stands for English language speaking skill.
- L1 and L2 are the levels of ELSS of the participants. L1 corresponds to A1 and L2 corresponds to B1 in terms of the CEFR.
- Length of the EL study presents the number of years of the EL study by the time the participants were interviewed.

The proportion of men and women reflects the representation of male and female military students at the UoD. The first-year students confirmed in the interview that they had been studying the English language for 11 years, and the second-year students confirmed that they had been studying the English language for 12 years.

Materials

The research utilised the *NATO STANAG 6001 descriptors for SLP 1 and 2* (see Appendix 1, BILC, 2020) and a *questionnaire* for semi-structured interview designed by the author of the paper. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions that elicited the answers pertinent to Q1, and open-ended questions that sought the students' opinions, as specified in Q3.

To compare the answers to Q1 with the whole Czech population, annual statistical reports *Maturitni zkouska 2013–2021* (CERMAT, 2019) and the document *Opatreni obecne povahy* (MSMT, 2021) were used.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and processed. Microsoft Excel (ExcelFunctions.net, 2008–2019) was used for data collection and advanced statistical Tools for Windows 10 were used for statistical analysis.

To answer Q1, *the unpaired two-sample T-Test for the differences between the means* was employed to determine the significance of the differences between the variables of both groups.

To answer Q2, *Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients* were calculated using the Excel PEARSON function. The outcomes regarding Q1 and Q2 were interpreted at $*p < .05$, customarily set for educational research, and compared to critical values using statistical tables (Fisher & Yates, 1963).

To answer Q3, content analysis was performed to categorize students' opinions and express them by descriptive statistics.

Results

Raw data gained from the interviews to address the first two research questions are provided in Appendix 2. The results below are arranged with respect to the research questions.

Q1: In which variables do the unsuccessful and successful EL speakers differ significantly?

The first variable was related to the type of the secondary school at which the participants studied before the UoD.

Tab. 2: *Type of secondary school at which the participants studied before the UoD*

Type of school	G1 ($n = 50$)	G2 ($n = 50$)
Grammar School	10 (20%)	34 (68%)
Specialized School	40 (80%)	16 (32%)

It is noticeable that the graduates from Grammar Schools have better developed English language speaking skills than the graduates from Secondary Specialized Schools, since the majority of the graduates from the Grammar Schools falls into G2 (68%), and the vast majority of graduates from Secondary Specialized Schools falls into group G1 (80%).

The means and differences pertaining to variables 2–4 are presented in Table 3.

The T-Test is expected to determine the significance of the differences between the means, 1 and 2. The results presented in Table 3 show that the p-values

returned by the T-Test are smaller than .05 in all the variables. That allows us to conclude that there are significant differences between the groups in all the variables at $*p < .05$. The absolute values of the computed t-values allow us to state the differences between groups by their significance in the descending order: MATURITA in EL, MATURITA in CLL, and MOTIV for EL.

Tab. 3: Arithmetic means of variables and T-Test results

Variables	μ_1	μ_2	<i>t</i> Stat	<i>p</i> (T-Test)
Maturita in EL	2.57 (<i>n</i> = 26)	1.53 (<i>n</i> = 40)	6.923553	2.21 · 10 ⁻⁹
Maturita in CLL	3.24 (<i>n</i> = 50)	2.08 (<i>n</i> = 50)	5.897077872	5.27161 · 10 ⁻⁸
Motiv for EL	6.16 (<i>n</i> = 50)	8.16 (<i>n</i> = 50)	-5.357421781	5.59232 · 10 ⁻⁷

Note:

- μ_1 = the mean of a variable in G1,
- μ_2 = the mean of a variable in G2,
- *t* Stat = *t*-value of the T-Test, $*p < .05$,
- *p* (T-Test) = *p*-value of the T-Test.
- MatURITA in EL stands for the secondary school leaving examination in English Language. The means of scores were calculated for 66 students only, since this exam is not obligatory for all students. The values were calculated from the first attempt grades reported by participants. The score scale is 1 to 5, with 1 being the highest grade.
- MATURITA in CLL stands for the secondary school leaving examination in Czech Language and Literature. The means of scores were calculated from the first attempt grades reported by participants. The score scale is 1 to 5, with 1 being the highest grade.
- Motiv for EL stands for students' self-evaluation of their motivation to learn English on the scale 1–10, with 10 being the highest grade.

To be able to compare the answers to Q1 with the whole Czech population, based on annual statistical reports Maturitni zkouska 2013–2021 (CERMAT, 2019) and document Opatreni obecne povahy (MSMT, 2021) it was calculated that the mean for the didactic tests equals 2.1 for MATURITA in EL and 2.9 for MATURITA in CLL. We can see that G1 achieved worse results and G2 achieved better results in both exams compared to the results from the didactic tests taken by the whole Czech population in the years 2013–2021.

Q2: What are the associations among the measurable variables (2–4)?

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated for variables 2–4. The critical value at the .05 significance level is 0.205 for 100 subjects, and 0.250 for 66 subjects concerning the MATURITA in EL (Fisher & Yates, 1963).

Table 4 shows that all coefficients exceed the critical values. Their strengths of associations are arranged in the descending order.

Tab. 4: Pearson correlation coefficients (r) between variables

Order	Variables	r
1	MATURITA in CLL and MATURITA in EL	0.550811
2	MOTIV for EL and MATURITA in CLL	-0.43912
3	MOTIV for EL and MATURITA in EL	-0.27589

See the note below Table 3.

Q3: What are the students' opinions on

- a) the causes of the level of their speaking skill in English?
- b) their shortcomings in English?
- c) what the UoD teachers should do to improve their students' speaking skills in English?

The answers to the questions are stated separately for both groups.

Q3 a) for G1: What, in your opinion, are the causes of the low level of your speaking skills in English?

- Not having gained sufficient basic knowledge and skills at basic and secondary schools (29). Too many different teachers were taking turns very often; some of them were incompetent, unmotivated and had an inappropriate approach to students.
- Personal characteristics (17), such as
 - anxiety, poor communication skills, introversion (9),
 - slow reactions in speaking, slow pace when speaking (5),
 - low language aptitude, focus on science (3).
- Not enough opportunities to speak English (14).
- Lack of motivation to study the English language (8).

Q3 b) for G1: What are your shortcomings in English?

- Low amount of vocabulary and its poor usage (35).
- Problems in grammar, namely in verb tenses, prepositions, structure of a sentence (28).
- Translation from Czech affects fluency (7).
- Not enough ideas on what to speak about (4).

Q3 c) for G1: What should the UoD teachers do to improve students' speaking skills in English?

- More focus on speaking in classes (17); teachers should make students speak (4).
- More focus on practising vocabulary (6).
- More EL classes (4).

Q3 a) for G2: What, in your opinion, are the causes of the appropriate level of your speaking skills in English?

- Acquiring the English language outside classrooms, such as reading books, watching films, playing computer games, listening to English songs, using English as a tool in IT (32).
- Having gained sufficient knowledge and skills at basic and secondary schools (21). Competent and strict teachers at basic and/or secondary schools, appropriate preparation for the Maturita Examination or other exams (FCE), and the chance to attend facultative classes at basic and/or secondary schools.
- High motivation to speak in English (19) concerning
 - traveling or staying in English speaking countries (9),
 - conversation or exchanging letters with foreigners (5),
 - conversation with a native English speaker (5).

Q3 b) for G2: What are your shortcomings in English?

- Vocabulary (38).
- Grammar (25), namely tenses, prepositions, articles and sentence structures.

Q3 c) for G2: What should the UoD teachers do to improve students' speaking skills in English?

- More English language classes (13).
- Focus on speaking in classes (13), elaborating on topics, conducting debates, news briefs.
- Focus on vocabulary development (8).

Discussion

Indicators for success in foreign language speaking

The answers to Q1 and Q2 have identified the differences between successful and unsuccessful EL speakers, and showed the degree of associations among the examined variables. As expected, the graduates from Grammar Schools were more successful EL speakers than the graduates from Specialized Schools. Successful EL speakers performed significantly better both at Czech Language and Literature

and English Language in the Maturita Examination, and were more motivated to learn English than the unsuccessful English language speakers. The details concerning individual variables are stated below.

The type of the secondary school at which the participants studied before the UoD

One of the characteristics of the research sample shows that most successful EL speakers (68%) graduated from Grammar Schools, whereas most unsuccessful EL speakers (80%) graduated from Specialized Schools. Traditionally, study programs at Grammar Schools aim at acquiring general knowledge with the prospect of continuing studies at a university, and pay more attention to language education than Specialized Schools. Since most interaction in the English language takes place at schools, the number of lessons and the quantity and quality of instruction play a deceive role in developing students' ELSS.

Unfortunately, CERMAT statistics do not provide any data on ELSS in MATURITA in EL. They just report annual means of success in didactic tests, which focus on listening and reading at level B1 according to the CEFR (Maturitni zkouska 2013–2021, CERMAT, 2019). According to these statistics, the mean of scores for the whole Czech population for the years 2013–2021 was 67.4%, while the mean of scores for Grammar Schools only was significantly higher, 79.3%. Since there is enough scientific evidence in literature that the levels of the four main language skills are interrelated (e.g., Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002; Ellis, 2015; Berman, 2016; Winke & Gass, 2019; Kim & Pae, 2021), CERMAT statistics and our results imply that Grammar Schools produce graduates at a higher level of proficiency in the English language than Specialized Schools.

Maturita Examination in English Language and Czech Language and Literature

The significant differences between both groups in the MATURITA Examination in EL and CLL leads us to the assumption that the grades in languages in the MATURITA Examination can be considered quite reliable predictors for the success in foreign language speaking in adulthood. This finding is also supported by the highest association among these variables presented in answers to Q2, which offers an additional piece of evidence supporting the linguistic interdependence hypothesis which states that language and literacy skills can be transferred from one language to another (Cummins, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1991), and suggests the importance of the development of native language competence with regard to later proficiency in a foreign language (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002).

This outcome is of great importance and might play a role in the admission process at universities, for example, in times when it is not possible to carry out the entrance examination in English Language, as it happened at the UoD in 2020 due

to precautionary measures adopted in connection with the COVID-19 pandemics. It might seem obvious that the grade in English Language predicts the success in speaking in English; however, the significant association between the grade in Czech Language Literature and level of ELSS may come as a surprise and may be taken into consideration in the admission procedure at universities in the future.

Motivation for learning English

Moderate correlations between motivation to learn English and the score for speaking skills in Czech, and between the motivation to learn English and the grades for the Maturita Examination in Czech Language and Literature offer an additional piece of evidence that motivation belongs to significant factors determining success in learning languages, as confirmed in the literature (e.g., Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; Dörnyei, 1998, 2001; Ellis, 2005; Nemethova, 2020; Prevratilova, 2020).

It is quite surprising that the coefficient between the motivation to learn English and results of the Maturita Examination in English Language is lower than the association between the motivation to learn English and grades in the Maturita Examination in Czech Language and Literature. It implies that motivation for learning a foreign language might be associated with the proficiency in a native language.

Students' opinions on the development of their English speaking skills

The answers to Q3 imply that most unsuccessful EL speakers blame their primary and secondary EL teachers for their poor ELSS. On reflexion, some of them admit that their communication skills are poor and their motivation to learn languages is low. Also, some of them lack the opportunity to speak English. They suggest that they need more practice in speaking, particularly in using vocabulary and grammar, and that they would welcome more EL instruction.

On the other hand, most successful EL speakers state that they achieved a good level in ELSS outside classrooms due to their high motivation to communicate in English. They appreciate the approach of their primary and secondary EL teachers, and the opportunities to attend facultative EL classes. They suggest practising speaking by conducting debates, and developing vocabulary and grammar. Some of them would welcome more EL instruction.

Comparing the opinions of both groups supports Rubin's (1975) selection of main variables on which good language learning depends: *aptitude, motivation and opportunity*. The language learning path of successful EL speakers is congruent with her statement that good language learners seem to have a high motivation to

communicate, no matter where they are, and, therefore, they actively seek the *opportunities* to use the language. In addition to that, the comparison of the participants' opinions implies that the active involvement of successful EL speakers in their ELSS development demonstrated signs of autonomy and self-regulation in learning, which are considered of paramount importance in successful language learning (Nemethova, 2020; Yabukoshi, 2020; Rozsypalkova & Brzobohata, 2020).

Practical implications and recommendations

It can be implied that the means μ_1 and μ_2 , as introduced in Table 2, might be interpreted as critical values for detecting the path to success or failure in achieving the required ELSS. Let us illustrate this suggestion by presenting the means of variables for three participants from G1 in relation to their SLP achieved within two years after they were interviewed.

In Appendix 2 and Table 5, we can see that participant number 50 achieved the means, μ_1 (50), exceeding all the μ_1 and μ_2 values, which allowed us to assume that her prospects to achieve L2 in ELSS soon were excellent. This student met expectations and reached SLP 2222 within the required period of time. In contrast, participants number 12 and 14 achieved worst results, μ_1 (12) and μ_1 (14), than μ_1 in two variables. These students did not achieve L2 in ELSS and were expelled from the UoD.

Tab. 5: Illustration of using the arithmetic means for detecting the path to success or failure in speaking in English

Variables	μ_1	μ_2	μ_1 (50)	μ_1 (12)	μ_1 (14)
MATURITA in EL	2.57	1.53	–	3	–
MATURITA in CLL	3.24	2.08	1	5	4
Motiv for EL	6.16	8.16	10	8	6

Note. See the note below Table 3.

Thus, in addition to SLP, this simple instrument may assist the UoD educators in the identification of students at risk of not meeting the English language requirements at an early stage of their study at the university, and, consequently, adjust their language development to prevent unwanted dropout. The means for G1 (1) can be considered critical values and the students whose means are worse might need special tuition. Educators should also encourage at-risk students to self-regulate their language acquisition and search opportunities for communication outside classrooms. In addition to that, both students and educators should be aware of linguistic interdependence hypothesis which states that in bilingual development language and literacy skills can be transferred from one language to another (Cummins, 1979), and look for opportunities to hone both their native and foreign language skills.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in light of some limitations. The relevance of each variable (1–4) in Q1 to the level of ELSS could become the subject of profound discussion. As mentioned above, in general, curricula at Grammar Schools are designed with a larger time allowance for foreign languages than those at Specialized Schools. Obviously, Maturita grades in languages include a complex assessment of skills and knowledge, and speaking constitutes only a part of it. Self-reported motivation might be considered subjective.

Second, the information produced from this study is descriptive and correlational, and causation cannot be inferred. We have to bear in mind that the participants experienced different conditions in their previous language study, and their command of both languages had been influenced by many factors that could not have been taken into consideration with regard to the scope of this paper. For example, the study did not explore the participants' aptitude, personality, learning style, strategies, metacognition and autonomy, which are crucial to success in foreign language learning, as proved by many researchers (e.g., Reiss et al., 1983; Griffiths, 2015; Nemethova, 2020; Yabukoshi, 2020; Rozsypalkova & Brzobohata, 2020).

Conclusion

The results confirmed the assumptions that there are significant differences between successful and unsuccessful EL speakers in all the examined variables: the type of secondary school, their grades in school leaving exams in English Language and Czech Language and Literature, and their motivation to learn the English language. Moreover, the research has revealed that all the variables are significantly associated; therefore, there is a probability that an improvement of any of them should positively influence the others. These findings, coupled with the students' opinions on their language learning experience, allow us to design a path to success or failure in foreign language speaking with respect to the examined variables.

The path to success is paved with a diligent approach to gaining knowledge and skills in the English and Czech languages at basic and secondary schools. In this research sample, most successful English language speakers studied at Grammar Schools, which are generally considered more effective in the preparation for the tertiary education, although there might be some exceptions. The arithmetic means in English Language and Czech Language and Literature in the Maturita Examination exceeded the means achieved in the didactic tests by the whole population in the Czech Republic (within the years 2013–2021). Successful speakers are aware of the benefits of being an efficient EL speaker outside the classroom and are willing to acquire the EL on their own; they actively seek opportunities to

speak and are able to self-regulate their language acquisition. They attribute their success to factors within their control.

The path to failure starts with a submissive attitude to English Language at basic and secondary schools, where the students do not achieve the goals specified by MSMT for exit levels in their first foreign language, A2 and B1, respectively. In this research sample, most unsuccessful English language speakers studied at Specialized Schools, which are generally not focused on languages. The arithmetic means in the in English Language and Czech Language and Literature in their Maturita Examination were lower than the means achieved in the didactic tests by the whole population in the Czech Republic (within the years 2013–2021). Unsuccessful EL speakers are less motivated to learn English than the successful ones. Most of them attribute their poor oral performance to factors outside their control; they blame their previous teachers for incompetence and for not providing them with enough opportunities to speak English.

This empirical study has proved that comparing successful and unsuccessful language learners from different perspectives is beneficial and might have some practical implications. The finding about the relevance of grades both in native and foreign languages in the Maturita Examination might assist the decision makers responsible for setting the admission requirements at universities. In addition to that, the study has offered critical means in selected variables which might serve as early warning for dropping out due to poorly developed foreign language speaking skills. Last but not least, assisting students in reflecting on their language learning proved to be a delightful experience that allowed us, the educators, to build rapport with our students, which is a prerequisite for successful collaboration in their further language skills development.

Acknowledgement

This study is a part of the Project for the Development of the Organization (DZRO – Language) that has been carried out at the Language Centre, University of Defence, Czech Republic.

Let me express my deepest gratitude to the reviewers for their insightful comments that contributed to the improvement of the article. In addition, I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of my colleagues Renata Chlumská and Dana Zerzanová in gathering data by conducting 66 interviews with students.

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Appendix 1

NATO STANAG 6001 Descriptors for SLP 1 and 2 According to NATO STANDARD A TRAINP-5 (BILC, 2020)

Level 1 – Survival

Able to maintain simple face-to-face communication in typical everyday situations. Can create with the language by combining and recombining familiar, learned elements of speech. Can begin, maintain and close short conversations by asking and answering short simple questions. Can typically satisfy simple, predictable, personal and accommodation needs; meet minimum courtesy, introduction, and identification requirements; exchange greetings; elicit and provide predictable, skeletal biographical information; communicate about simple routine tasks in the workplace; ask for goods, services, and assistance; request information and clarification; express satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and confirmation. Topics include basic needs such as ordering meals, obtaining lodging and transportation, shopping. Native speakers used to speaking with non-natives must often strain, request repetition and use real-world knowledge to understand this speaker. Seldom speaks with natural fluency, and cannot produce continuous discourse, except with rehearsed material. Nonetheless, can speak at the sentence level and may produce strings of two or more simple, short sentences joined by common linking words. Frequent errors in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar often distort meaning. Time concepts are vague. May often use only one tense or tend to avoid certain structures. Speech is often characterized by hesitations, erratic word order, frequent pauses, straining and groping for words (except for routine expressions), ineffective reformulation, and self-corrections. (p. A-3)

Level 2 – Functional

Able to communicate in everyday social and routine workplace situations. In these situations the speaker can describe people, places, and things; narrate current, past and future activities in complete, but simple paragraphs; state facts; compare and contrast; give straightforward instructions and directions; ask and answer predictable questions. Can confidently handle most normal, casual conversations on concrete topics such as job procedures, family, personal background and interests, travel, current events. Can often elaborate in common daily communicative situations, such as personal and accommodation-related interactions; for example, can give complicated, detailed, and extensive directions and make non-routine changes in travel and other arrangements. Can interact with native speakers not used to speaking with non-natives, although natives may have to adjust to some limitations. Can combine and link sentences into paragraph-length discourse. Simple structures and basic grammatical relations are typically controlled, while more complex structures are used inaccurately or avoided. Vocabulary use is appropriate for high-frequency utterances but unusual or imprecise at other times. Errors in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar may sometimes distort meaning. However, the individual generally speaks in a way that is appropriate to the situation, although command of the spoken language is not always firm. (pp. A-3–A-4)

Appendix 2

Tab. 6: Data gained from G1, the participants who achieved level 1 in English speaking skills according to the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination

Participants	Secondary school	MATURITA in EL	MATURITA in CLL	MOTIV for EL
1	GS	2	2	4
2	SS	3	3	6
3	SS	-	3	6
4	SS	3	3	6
5	SS	2	3	10
6	GS	3	4	4
7	SS	-	3	6
8	SS	3	4	4
9	SS	-	4	4
10	SS	2	3	4
11	SS	3	2	4
12	SS	3	5	8
13	SS	-	2	8
14	SS	-	4	6
15	GS	-	3	6
16	GS	-	4	4
17	SS	-	4	4
18	SS	2	2	8
19	SS	-	4	6
20	SS	2	3	6
21	SS	3	3	8
22	GS	-	3	6
23	SS	3	4	6

(to be continued on the next page)

Participants	Secondary school	MATURITA in EL	MATURITA in CLL	MOTIV for EL
24	SS	-	2	6
25	SS	-	3	6
26	SS	-	4	6
27	SS	-	4	7
28	SS	-	3	6
29	SS	3	3	6
30	GS	1	2	6
31	GS	3	4	4
32	SS	-	4	4
33	GS	3	5	6
34	SS	-	2	6
35	SS	-	2	6
36	SS	3	5	8
37	SS	2	5	4
38	SS	2	3	6
39	SS	3	5	6
40	SS	2	5	6
41	SS	2	4	4
42	GS	2	3	4
43	GS	3	3	4
44	SS	2	2	10
45	SS	4	4	10
46	SS	-	2	8
47	SS	-	2	10
48	SS	-	2	6
49	SS	3	3	9
50	SS	-	1	10

Tab. 7: Data gained from G2, the participants who achieved level 2 in English speaking skills according to the NATO STANAG 6001 Examination

Participants	Secondary school	MATURITA in EL	MATURITA in CLL	MOTIV for EL
51	SS	1	3	8
52	GS	-	3	8
53	GS	1	2	6
54	GS	2	1	10
55	GS	2	3	8
56	GS	-	2	10
57	SS	3	4	10
58	SS	2	2	4
59	GS	2	3	7
60	GS	2	2	10
61	GS	2	5	6

(to be continued on the next page)

Participants	Secondary school	MATURITA in EL	MATURITA in CLL	MOTIV for EL
62	SS	-	2	6
63	SS	2	4	6
64	GS	1	2	9
65	GS	1	4	6
66	GS	1	2	7
67	GS	1	2	8
68	GS	-	3	7
69	GS	2	2	4
70	SS	1	2	7
71	SS	2	2	8
72	GS	3	2	8
73	GS	1	1	8
74	GS	1	2	10
75	SS	1	2	7
76	GS	2	2	8
77	GS	1	2	10
78	SS	2	2	8
79	SS	2	2	9
80	GS	-	3	6
81	SS	1	2	10
82	SS	-	2	10
83	GS	1	2	6
84	GS	-	1	10
85	GS	1	1	10
86	GS	-	2	10
87	SS	1	1	3
88	GS	2	2	9
89	SS	2	1	8
90	GS	1	1	10
91	SS	1	1	10
92	GS	-	2	9
93	GS	1	4	10
94	GS	-	2	10
95	SS	1	2	10
96	GS	2	1	6
97	GS	2	1	8
98	GS	1	1	10
99	GS	1	1	10
100	GS	2	1	10

Note.

- GS stands for Grammar School.
- SS stands for Specialized School.

- Maturita in EL stands for the secondary school leaving examination in English Language. The values express the grade on the scale 1–5, with 1 being the highest grade.
- MATURITA in CLL stands for the secondary school leaving examination in Czech Language and Literature. The values express the grade on the scale 1–5, with 1 being the highest grade.
- Motiv for EL stands for the students' self-evaluation of their motivation to learn English on the scale 1–10, with 10 being the highest grade.

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