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## **Students' Attitudes towards their EFL Lessons and Teachers: Their Retrospective Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article investigates attitudes towards English as a foreign language (EFL) by focusing on retrospective accounts of higher-education students' experience with learning English. The first part looks at individual factors affecting foreign language (FL) learning, such as attitudes towards FL learning and FL anxiety. The second part presents the results of a study conducted among students of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Primorska. The main aim of the study was to identify students' attitudes towards their past EFL lessons and teachers and students' FL anxiety level. The results show that anxiety is a serious problem and that students exhibit alarmingly negative attitudes towards EFL lessons and teachers.

**Key words:** learning anxiety, foreign language anxiety, attitudes towards foreign language instruction, attitudes towards EFL teachers, English language

## **Stališča študentov do tujejezikovnega pouka in učiteljev: retrospektivna študija**

Izvirni znanstveni članek

UDK: 37.015.3:159.937:811.111'243

### **POVZETEK**

Med najbolj pomembnimi cilji tujejezikovnega pouka je oblikovanje pozitivnih stališč učencev do učenja tujega jezika. Članek se zato posveča stališčem študentov do učenja angleščine kot tujega jezika na podlagi retrospektivne študije. Navezujoč se na delo številnih avtorjev, kot so Gardner (2004, 2010), Dörnyei (2005, 2009) in Horwitz (1986, 2001), se v prvem delu posvetimo različnim dejavnikom, ki vplivajo na učenje tujega jezika, kot so stališča do učenja tujega jezika, tesnoba in motivacija. V drugem delu predstavimo rezultate neeksperimentalne deskriptivne raziskave, ki je bila izvedena s pomočjo vprašalnika med študenti Univerze na Primorskem. Poglavitni cilj študije je bil prepoznati stališča študentov do pouka angleščine v osnovni šoli in do njihovih osnovnošolskih učiteljev angleščine ter jih primerjati z njihovimi stališči do pouka in učiteljev angleščine v srednji

šoli. Posebno pozornost smo posvetili iskanju povezave med stopnjo tesnobe pri tujem jeziku pri študentih ter njihovimi stališči do pouka angleščine in do učiteljev v osnovni in srednji šoli.

**Ključne besede:** tesnoba pri učenju, tesnoba pri tujem jeziku, stališča do tujejezikovnega pouka, stališča do tujejezikovnih učiteljev, angleški jezik

## Introduction

One of the most important objectives of foreign language teaching is to foster positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language. With this in view, the study investigates attitudes towards English as a foreign language by focusing on retrospective accounts of higher-education students' experience with learning English. Respondents included in the research were first-year students of the Faculty of Health Sciences who take English in the first year of their undergraduate studies. However, the research does not focus on the students' experience with learning English at tertiary level but rather their reflection on their English learning in primary and secondary school. Drawing on the work of several authors, such as Gardner (2004; 2010), Dörnyei (2005; 2009) and Horwitz (1986; 2001), it looks at a number of psychological factors affecting foreign language learning, such as attitudes towards learning a foreign language, anxiety, motivation and others. This study focuses primarily on attitudes towards learning a foreign language and foreign language anxiety. Nastran Ule (2000) defines attitudes as lasting systems of positive and negative evaluation, feeling and activity in relation to different social situations and objects. She also states that attitudes influence our behaviour in certain situations but even though attitudes are long-lasting, there are several factors that influence their formation. With this in mind, teachers can intentionally lead their learners to form positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language. To be able to do this successfully, teachers must be aware of their students' attitudes as well as ways how to influence them.

## Attitudes and anxiety in foreign language learning

In the last few decades great effort has been devoted to the study of different factors affecting foreign language acquisition. Gardner (2005) argues that they can be categorised into two different groups. The first group consists of environmental characteristics, such as quality of instruction (which involves the teacher, curriculum, and lesson plans), opportunities to use the language, as well as the socio-cultural environment and its expectations. The second group entails factors that refer to the characteristics of the learner, such as a student's scholastic ability and language aptitude, affect (attitudes, motivation, language anxiety), personality variables (willingness to communicate, self-confidence), and learning strategies. While the environment has a strong influence on foreign language learning,

different signals from the environment are processed in a specific way by each individual. It has been shown that different individuals achieve very different results in the same environment, which points to the importance of individual factors in learning a foreign language. The main objective of this paper is to discuss two individual factors, i.e. foreign language learning anxiety and attitudes towards EFL lessons and teachers. There has been a great deal of research dedicated to foreign language anxiety and attitudes towards learning a foreign language (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986, Horwitz 2001, Mihaljević Djigunović 2012, Žefran and Cencič 2013, Verma 2008, Norris-Holt 2002). Some researchers mainly focus on studying specific correlations between anxiety and foreign language achievement and consider anxiety to be the principal factor influencing foreign language learning (Young 1991, 1998, Horwitz 2001, Yan and Horwitz 2008), whereas others regard it as a minor factor influencing learning only in relationship with other individual factors, such as motivation, attitudes and others (Gardner and MacIntyre 1993, Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford 2003, Gardner 2004). An important achievement of these studies was the development of the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986), which is used to identify and measure foreign language anxiety in the classroom. At approximately the same time Gardner (1985) formulated his *Socio-educational Model*, which explains the relationship between different individual factors. In the following years, the model was tested and changed (Gardner 2006, 2010) (Figure 1), taking into account more variables affecting individual factors and all these variables were gathered in the second instrument in the field of individual differences, the *Attitude/Motivation Test Battery* (Gardner 1985; 2004). This instrument focused on measuring attitudes towards learning a foreign language, motivation and foreign language anxiety. It was first designed to measure attitudes and motivation in the area of learning French as a second language in Canada, but was later modified and tested by researchers from Brazil, Croatia, Japan, Poland, Romania and Spain.

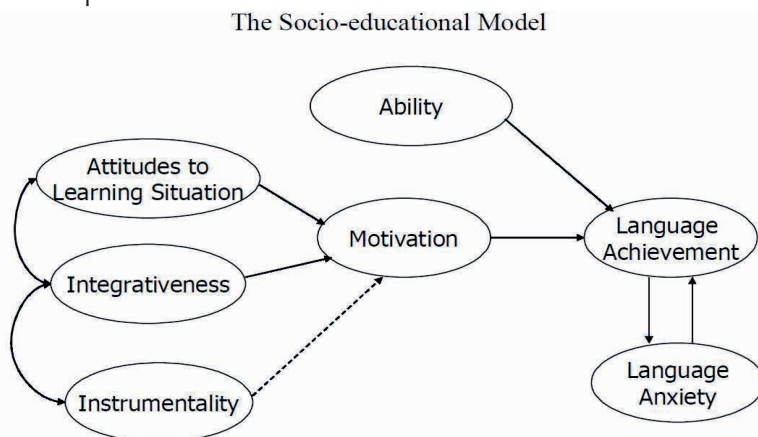


Figure 1: The Socio-educational model

The Socio-educational model is based on the premise that motivation is one of the key factors influencing foreign language learning. According to the model, motivation is related to two main groups of variables. The first group refers to attitudes to the learning situation, which includes attitudes to the teacher, and attitudes to the lessons. This implies that the level of motivation in learners will be higher if the teacher is skilled and confident and if the lessons are carefully planned and exciting. The other variable which according to Gardner (2005) influences motivation is integrativeness. It has to be noted that integrativeness does not refer to integrative motivation or integrative orientation but rather to 'an individual's openness to taking on characteristics of another cultural/linguistic group' (Gardner 2005). Taking a closer look at Gardner's Socio-educational model, it is clear that it was designed based on studies in a bilingual environment since the author puts strong emphasis on the influence of one cultural group over another. However, this model might not be applicable in all situations. When learning a foreign language, one might not have a direct contact with the target culture/language and the variable of integrativeness might not prove to correlate with motivation as strongly as it would in a bilingual area.

A number of researchers agree that attitudes towards learning a foreign language have a strong association with direct behaviour and are therefore an important factor when exploring individual differences (Mihaljević Djigunović 1998, Norris-Holt 2002, İnal, Evin, Saracaloğlu 2004, Verma 2008). Nastran Ule (2000, 116) maintains that attitudes are fairly permanent systems of positive or negative evaluation, feelings and actions in relation to different social situations. She describes attitudes in a similar way as Brown (2000), defining them as long-lasting psychological readiness to react in certain ways, and goes on to argue that attitudes are acquired from early childhood on and are influenced by attitudes of significant others (parents, peers). Moreover, they have a considerable impact on our behaviour. According to Nastran Ule (2000), the fundamental characteristic of attitudes is the fact that they consist of three main components. The first component is cognitive and is related to one's beliefs, thoughts and ideas about something. The second, affective component is based on an individual's feelings or emotions towards something, and finally, the third component is behavioural (or conative) and describes the tendency to act in certain ways. So when a learner is faced with a foreign language, he or she adopts an attitude towards learning this language. For instance, a learner might adopt a negative attitude towards learning English based on his or her assumption that the English language is complicated and difficult, combined with the fact that he or she is afraid of his or her very strict English teacher, and will therefore try to avoid learning English or will not participate willingly in class.

Since attitudes play a fundamental role in shaping our behaviour, it is crucial for FL teachers to be able to identify learners' attitudes and develop techniques to influence them in a positive way. Even though attitudes are fairly long-lasting and

permanent, they can still be modified and Nastran Ule (2000) points out that our direct experiences and knowledge have a considerable influence on the formation of our attitudes. However, we should emphasize that each experience can be linked with a number of different interpretations and expectations of an individual in a certain social environment. Error correction in a FL classroom, which is usually considered a source of anxiety and negative attitudes, might be interpreted as positive, the learner seeing it as a teacher's attempt to help the learner improve. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to be able to identify the learners' attitudes towards learning the FL. Dörnyei (2001, 217) also emphasizes the importance of creating realistic learner beliefs, which can be an invaluable motivational strategy. This might also be a useful technique to reduce foreign language learning anxiety, which, according to Arnold and Brown (1999, 8) 'is the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process.' This is also one of the reasons why there has been a growing interest in this topic in the past few decades. However, Dörnyei (2005, 198) expresses concern about how 'ambiguous the conceptualisation of anxiety becomes when we go under the surface', despite years of research into anxiety. Anxiety is a complex phenomenon which consists of several different aspects. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) and Horwitz (2001, 113) discuss trait anxiety and state anxiety (also referred to as situation-specific anxiety) and argue that foreign language anxiety belongs to the latter category, which is usually 'seen as a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus', whereas state anxiety 'is a relatively stable personality characteristic'. An important discovery in foreign language anxiety research was the fact that foreign language anxiety is an independent factor, not connected to trait anxiety (Horwitz, 2001).

Since attitudes and anxiety can have a negative influence on foreign language achievement, it is sensible to investigate the connection between foreign language anxiety and foreign language achievement, as well as find the reasons for foreign language anxiety. For this reason, the main aim of the study was to identify students' attitudes towards primary school EFL lessons and EFL teachers compared to those in secondary school based on their past learning experience, as well as identify the level of foreign language anxiety. Special emphasis is given to determining the relationship between students' foreign language anxiety level and their attitude towards their EFL lessons and teachers in primary and secondary school.

The aims of this study were:

- to identify the attitudes of health sciences students towards their primary and secondary school teachers of English
  - to identify the attitudes of health sciences students towards learning English
  - to identify the levels of foreign language anxiety in health sciences students
  - to determine the connection between students' attitudes towards learning English and their FL achievement
  - to determine the connection between students' attitudes towards learning English and their levels of foreign language anxiety.
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## Methods

The study was based on a survey carried out among students of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Primorska. It was part of a larger study carried out among all of the first year students of the University of Primorska. The survey in a form of a questionnaire was based on two sources; Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner 1985; 2004) and the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986, Horwitz 2001). The data were collected in October 2013 and were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The validity of the instrument was confirmed by using factor analysis, which indicated that the first factor accounts for 30.4% of variance. An examination of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggested that the sample was factorable ( $KMO=0.813$ ) The reliability was calculated with Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.767$ ), which indicates that the instrument is fairly reliable. Furthermore, chi-square test was used to compare attributive variables and Spearman's rank correlation was used to evaluate the relationship between students' anxiety levels, their attitudes and their achievement.

## Sample

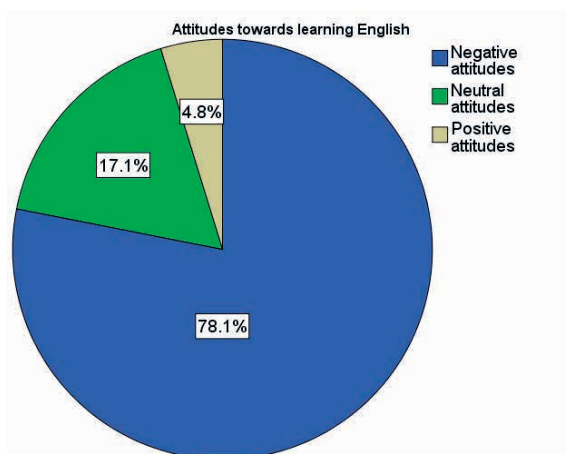
The sample comprised 105 first-year students studying in the area of health sciences. The reason for sample choice was the fact that university students already have quite some experience with learning foreign languages and have therefore had an opportunity to form their attitudes towards learning a foreign language and towards their FL teachers. At the same time university students possess metacognitive skills, which might not be the case with younger learners. Almost three quarters (73.3 per cent) of the respondents were female and 26.7 per cent were male. In terms of their grades in secondary school, the respondents were quite evenly distributed, most of the students achieving grades 3 and 4 (36.2 per cent in each group). 14.4 per cent achieved grade 2, and 11.4 per cent achieved the highest grade (5). In terms of taking English as part of their final examination (matura examination), we could see that more than 55 per cent of the students did not choose to take English for their matura examination. The respondents were also asked to report their grades in their final examination. There is no grade for those who did not take English as part of their final examination (55.2 per cent), but the distribution of other results is similar to the average grades in secondary school, the majority of students again achieving grades 3 (11.4 per cent) and 4 (23.8 per cent). 1.9 per cent of the students achieved grade 2 and 7.6 per cent of them grade 5.

## Results

The results indicate alarmingly negative attitudes towards learning English as well as towards the EFL teachers. As shown in Chart 1, almost 80 per cent of the students

reported having negative attitudes towards learning English. 17 per cent of the respondents showed a mixture of positive and negative attitudes and less than 5 per cent of the students have positive attitudes towards learning English in primary and secondary school.

Chart 1: Attitudes towards learning English



Charts 2 and 3 show the respondents' attitude towards their EFL teachers in primary school (Chart 2) and in secondary school (Chart 3). Again, the majority of students report having negative attitudes. Almost 64 per cent of the respondents exhibit negative attitudes towards their EFL teachers in primary school while a slightly lower per cent (58 %) report having negative attitudes towards their EFL teachers in secondary school. It must be noted, however, that in the case of attitudes towards students' secondary school EFL teachers the chi-square test revealed that the results are not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=2.752$ ,  $g=1$ ,  $P= .097$ ).

Chart 2: Primary EFL teachers

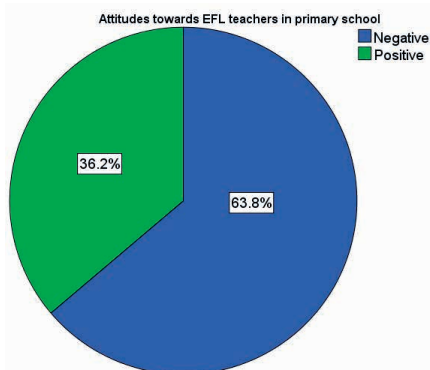
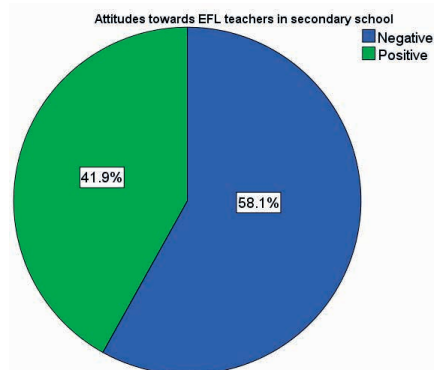


Chart 3: Secondary EFL teachers

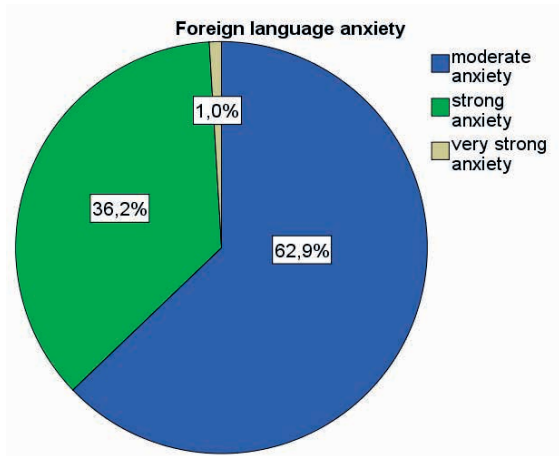


In addition to having quite negative attitudes towards learning English and towards their EFL teachers, the respondents also exhibit relatively high levels of foreign language anxiety (Chart 4). Even though 63 per cent of respondents exhibit moderate levels of FL anxiety, which is not so alarming, there are, disturbingly,



more than 36 per cent of the students experiencing strong or very strong levels of FL anxiety.

Chart 4: Anxiety



The results indicate that there is no significant correlation between students' attitudes towards their primary school EFL teachers and their achievement; however, there is a slight correlation between their attitudes towards their secondary school EFL teachers and their achievement, as well as between their attitudes towards their secondary school EFL teachers and their decision about taking English as part of their matura examination (see Table 1). Respondents' anxiety levels correlate strongly with their achievement in secondary school and with their decision to take English as part of their final examination. There is also a slight correlation between respondents' anxiety level and their attitudes towards learning English and also between their anxiety level and their final examination results.



Table 1: Correlations between different individual factors

		Anxiety level	Attitudes towards the secondary school EFL teacher	Attitudes towards the primary school EFL teacher	Attitudes towards learning English	Your grade at English matura:	Your average grade at English in secondary school:	Did you take English as part of your matura examination?
Anxiety level	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.066	-.128	-.204*	.203*	-.347**	.263**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.502	.194	.037	.038	.000	.007
Attitudes towards the secondary school EFL teacher	Correlation Coefficient	.066	1.000	.164	-.029	.223*	-.210*	.194*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.502	.	.095	.768	.022	.032	.048
Attitudes towards the primary school EFL teacher	Correlation Coefficient	-.128	.164	1.000	.089	.168	-.155	.152
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.194	.095	.	.369	.086	.115	.121
Attitudes towards learning English	Correlation Coefficient	-.204*	-.029	.089	1.000	.059	.090	.107
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.037	.768	.369	.	.549	.360	.278
Your grade at English matura:	Correlation Coefficient	.203*	.223*	.168	.059	1.000	-.255**	.936**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	.022	.086	.549	.	.009	.000
Your average grade at English in secondary school:	Correlation Coefficient	-.347**	-.210*	-.155	.090	-.255**	1.000	-.352**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.032	.115	.360	.009	.	.000
Did you take English as part of your matura examination?	Correlation Coefficient	.263**	.194*	.152	.107	.936**	-.352**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.048	.121	.278	.000	.000	.
	N	105	105	105	105	105	105	105

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

After determining the correlations, further tests were conducted. Crosstabs were used to explore the relationship between selected variables. The results have shown that the respondents with lower levels of anxiety reported having slightly more positive attitudes towards learning English, even though there are still many who have negative attitudes towards learning English regardless of their anxiety level (Table 2).

Table 2: Foreign language anxiety \* Attitude towards learning English

		Attitude towards learning English			Total
		Negative	Neutral	Positive	
FL Anxiety	Moderate	47	16	3	66
	Strong	35	2	2	39
Total		82	18	5	105

It can be observed that students with lower grades exhibit higher levels of anxiety compared to their peers with higher grades (Table 3).

Table 3: Foreign language anxiety \* Average grade at English in secondary school

		Average grade at English in secondary school:					Total
		2	3	4	5	other	
FL anxiety	Moderate	4	21	30	11	0	66
	Strong	11	17	8	1	2	39
Total		15	38	38	12	2	105

Those who did not take English as part of their final examination (matura) also exhibit higher levels of anxiety and those with higher grades in their English matura exams show the lowest levels of anxiety (Table 4).

Table 4: Foreign language anxiety \* English matura grade

		English matura grade:					Total
		2	3	4	5	no grade	
FL anxiety	Moderate	0	9	20	7	30	66
	Strong	2	3	5	1	29	39
Total		2	12	25	8	58	105

As shown in Table 5, it is interesting that students with higher grades show a slightly more negative attitude towards their secondary school FL teachers compared to their peers with lower grades. However, the chi-square test revealed that these results are not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=6.077$ ,  $g=4$ ,  $P=.193$ ).

Table 5: Attitude to secondary school FL teacher \* Average grade at English in secondary school

		Average grade at English in secondary school:					Total
		2	3	4	5	other	
Attitude to secondary school FL teacher	Negative	6	19	27	8	1	61
	Positive	9	19	11	4	1	44
Total		15	38	38	12	2	105

## Discussion

The results of this study have shown that foreign language anxiety is very much present with Slovenian students of health sciences and that it correlates with their foreign language achievements. In agreement with the findings of other researchers

(e.g.: Horwitz 2001, MacIntyre and Gardner 1994), this study also revealed that respondents with higher anxiety levels have lower FL achievement compared to those with lower anxiety levels. However, even more upsetting is the finding that the majority of students exhibit negative attitudes towards learning English and towards their FL teachers. There is no significant correlation between attitudes towards learning English and FL achievements but there is a slight correlation between students' attitudes towards their secondary school FL teachers and their FL achievement. Even though the correlation turned out to be statistically not significant, it is shocking that students with higher grades exhibit more negative attitudes towards their FL teachers than students with lower grades. This aspect would be worth investigating further to find out the possible reasons for such results.

It is also worth taking a closer look at some individual answers about students' experience with learning English. When asked about their knowledge of English, only 45 per cent said it was good, whereas the rest stated it was quite bad. Another interesting outcome is that 51 per cent of the students report being afraid of speaking English either all the time or in certain situations. The results of this study are worrying and more research should be conducted aimed at developing techniques to improve students' attitudes towards learning EFL and reduce their FL anxiety.

## **Conclusion**

The results presented in this study are part of a larger on-going research aimed at identifying students' attitudes towards learning English, examining the relationship between anxiety, attitudes and FL achievement, exploring the reasons for negative attitudes, and investigating the teacher's role in forming students' attitudes. The key findings of this study reveal that health sciences students exhibit worryingly negative attitudes towards learning English and towards their primary and secondary school FL teachers. Moreover, many students have shown to have high levels of foreign language anxiety, which correlates with their FL achievement. More than a half of the students feel that their knowledge of English is insufficient and half of them report being afraid of speaking English with other people. These unnerving findings call for more in-depth qualitative research aiming to define the causal relations between anxiety, attitudes and achievements in foreign language learning. Knowing that teachers might have a considerable influence on forming students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language, it might be reasonable to point to the problem and raise awareness among FL teachers. Further research is also needed to aid the development of guidelines for reducing FL anxiety in students and thus improving their FL achievement.

Mojca Žefran

## Stališča študentov do tujejezikovnega pouka in učiteljev: retrospektivna študija

Pomemben vidik tujejezikovnega poučevanja je nedvomno skrb za spodbujanje pozitivnih stališč do učenja tujega jezika. Članek se zato posveča stališčem študentov do učenja angleščine kot tujega jezika na podlagi retrospektivne študije. V prvem delu se osredotočimo na različne faktorje vpliva na učenje tujega jezika, kot so stališča in tesnoba. Pregled dela različnih strokovnjakov na področju stališč, motivacije in tesnobnosti (Gardner 2004, 2010; Dörnyei 2005, 2009; Horwitz 1986, 2001) razkrije, da so stališča, tesnoba in motivacija tesno povezani z uspešnostjo pri tujem jeziku. V pričujočem prispevku se osredotočimo predvsem na stališča, saj že Nastran Ule (2000) ugotavlja, da stališča v veliki meri vplivajo na naše vedenje, hkrati pa poudarja, da se stališča kljub njihovi relativno trajni naravi lahko spreminjajo. Avtorica (prav tam) tudi izpostavi, da na oblikovanje stališč pomembno vplivajo posameznikove neposredne izkušnje, kar pomeni, da bi lahko učitelji s svojimi dejanji v razredu načrtno vplivali na oblikovanje pozitivnih stališč učencev do učenja tujega jezika. Pri tem pa je zelo pomembno, da ugotovimo, kakšna so stališča učencev do učenja tujega jezika.

V drugem delu članka predstavimo rezultate kavzalno neeksperimentalne in deskriptivne raziskave, ki je bila izvedena med študenti Fakultete za vede o zdravju Univerze na Primorskem. Poglavitni cilj študije je bil prepoznati stališča študentov do pouka in učiteljev angleščine v osnovni in srednji šoli ter določiti njihovo stopnjo tesnobnosti pri tujem jeziku. Razlog za izbiro vzorca študentov je predvsem dejstvo, da imajo študenti svoja stališča do učenja tujega jezika že izoblikovana, hkrati pa so sposobni metakognicije, kar pa bi pri vzorcu mlajših učencev lahko predstavljalo problem. V raziskavo, ki je del obsežnejše študije, je bila vključena celotna populacija prvih letnikov Univerze na Primorskem, to je 105 študentov; raziskava je bila izvedena s pomočjo vprašalnika, ki je temeljil zlasti na dveh virih: testu stališč/motivacije, AMTB (Gardner 1985, 2004) in testu tesnobnosti pri pouku tujega jezika (Horwitz et al. 1986; Horwitz 2001). Rezultati so pokazali, da je tesnoba pri tujejezikovnem pouku resen problem in da imajo študenti negativna stališča tako do pouka kot do učiteljev angleščine. Tujejezikovna tesnoba v veliki meri korelira z uspešnostjo pri tujejezikovnem pouku kot tudi z odločitvijo študentov glede opravljanja angleščine pri maturi. Študenti z višjimi ocenami v srednji šoli izkazujejo nižjo stopnjo tesnobnosti kot tisti z nižjimi ocenami, tisti z višjo stopnjo tesnobnosti pa se večinoma niso odločili opravljati angleščine pri maturi. Zaskrbljujoče je dejstvo, da večina študentov (skoraj 80 %) izkazuje negativna stališča do učenja tujega jezika in da jih dobra polovica (51 %) pravi, da jim je neprijetno govoriti v angleščini. Čeprav bi morda pričakovali, da

imajo študenti z boljšimi dosežki tudi bolj pozitivna stališča do učenja tujega jezika, se je izkazalo, da so tudi njihova stališča v večji meri negativna. Ugotovitve naše raziskave razkrivajo zaskrbljujoče rezultate glede tesnobe pri tujem jeziku in stališč študentov do tujejezikovnega pouka. To nedvomno zahteva nadaljnje raziskave, ki bi pojasnile vzroke za trenutno stanje in morda oblikovale smernice, ki bi pomagale učiteljem pri zmanjševanju tujejezikovne tesnobe pri učencih in pri oblikovanju pozitivnih stališč do učenja tujega jezika, to pa bi lahko pozitivno vplivalo na uspešnost učencev pri tujejezikovnem pouku.

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