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Are They Part of the Equation? Foreign Language Teachers vs. Language Attrition A Diagnostic Study

Abstract

Non-pathological language attrition has been thoroughly investigated in the context of first as well as second language (for review, see Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012). However, still not enough is known about language attrition in a different population. Foreign language teachers, who often fight an uphill battle trying to prevent their learners' lack of progress, may also face a different challenge. Namely, their own linguistic skills may regress as well. Therefore, the inquiry should be extended so as to include this population. As a result, in the present study we aim to investigate the extent to which FL teachers are aware of the phenomenon of language attrition. The diagnostic study was motivated by anecdotal evidence and frequent interactions with foreign language teachers. Our observations rested on the assumption that FL teachers may experience stagnation in the language they teach or may even be on the verge of language regression. Twenty-one primary school non-native foreign language teachers (mean age 29) representing both rural and urban areas participated in the study. All participants had a B.A. in elementary education and were pursuing their M.A. in language teaching. In our pilot study, they were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire including both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The preliminary analysis reveals factors contributing to language loss among foreign language teachers and suggests future research directions.

Keywords: foreign language acquisition, language attrition, FL teacher

Rationale for the Study

Language teachers are essential components of the learning process. They create and develop language syllabi. They supervise the implementation of

language curricula. They are an integral part in the development of the educational process anywhere in the world (Harmer, 2007). Finally, they are a liaison between the language they teach with its corresponding culture and their students. Hence, they are expected to be competent not only methodologically but linguistically as well. We distinguish between language (or linguistic) competence and professional (or methodological) competence and make the former the scope of the present inquiry. The term linguistic (language) competence is understood here as relating to an adequate level of language appropriateness and correctness including: one's level of lexical knowledge, syntactic flexibility, a repertoire of registers, pragmatic understanding, the knowledge of the corresponding culture acquired while visiting the countries where the language is spoken natively. Language competence is contrasted with the notion of professional (or methodological) competence which relates to one's knowledge of methodology and pedagogy acquired in the course of studies and/or through participation in professional development initiatives such as workshops, methodological conferences, webinars, seminars, round tables where one is able to expand the scope of knowledge and ultimately gain more experience in teaching languages.

We state at the outset of the paper that maintaining linguistic competence of a foreign language teacher requires constant effort, diligence, and perseverance. The present study was motivated by our observations of extramural M.A. students at the University of Warsaw who already worked as elementary school foreign language teachers. The anecdotal evidence collected over the course of two years has shown that they constitute an increasingly diverse population. The foreign language teachers whom we observed not only represent different parts of Poland but also different levels of English proficiency and acquisition paths. In their language production, both spontaneous and rehearsed, they tend to make a wide range of errors some of which may have already fossilized (e.g., the inconsistent use of English inflection, non-target syntactic structures, erroneous lexical choices). The anecdotal evidence of their non-target production, which prompted us to pursue the matter further, was collected through frequent writing assignments and numerous in-class discussions.

Our observations coincided with the results of the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC, 2015). Fourteen European countries participated in the study in which three skills were assessed: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing. Poland was the only country where, additionally, speaking skills were evaluated. As many as 499 Polish 3rd-year junior high school students were tested in 37 schools throughout the country. The results indicated that 41% of the Polish students were at the A1 level. Every third student was at A2, while every fourth student represented the B1 level. The outcome was alarming considering that the participating students were nine years post-onset. While the learners in this comprehensive study were

examined thoroughly, no parallel study was conducted in Poland to investigate the language competences of teachers.

In contrast to the survey, a thorough assessment of EFL teacher competence was done in the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) implementation in Italy (Di Martino & Di Sabato, 2012). The authors intended to gain insights into EFL teachers' methodological/linguistic competence and needs. The report presents and analyzes criteria for the assessment of foreign language teacher competence (e.g., the Ministry only accepts certifications recognized by the governments of countries where the foreign languages to be certified are spoken natively, the list of recognized certifications is periodically updated, additional methodological training is available to those teachers whose language competence represents the C1 level of the CEF). Italian researchers and policy makers are in the process of gathering information regarding the exact number of teachers representing different levels of FL competence per region and stress the importance to investigate whether the level of competence teachers have self-assessed actually corresponds to real competence. They address, as well, critical issues such as the fact that most FL teachers in Italy never studied the language they teach in a systematic way or "the scarce professionalism" of some FL teachers. Lastly, Di Martino & Di Sabato recommend the Ministry of Education carry out a strict assessment of the teachers' foreign language competence.

Moreover, in Australia, special purpose tests have been designed to select overseas-qualified immigrants who apply for teacher education programs (the Diploma of Education, Oral Interview Test of English, Viete, 1998) or to assess language proficiency of, for instance, Italian and Japanese foreign language teachers (Elder, 1994; Elder et al., 1995). Prospective non-native language teachers are also observed and given feedback during a classroom language assessment scheduled to detect the English language problems faced by them during their teaching practice (Elder, 1993b). In the pursuit of creating adequate means of measurement and assessment, Elder (2001) evaluated the tests in terms of their authenticity, usefulness, practicality, and the environment in which they are administered. Still, more reliable and systematic studies on the assessment of foreign language teacher linguistic competences are needed.

Being a non-native language teacher is by no means a disadvantage. It is an asset. Previous research shows that native and non-native language teachers are easily distinguishable, independent groups, each with its unique characteristics. Benke and Medgyes (2005) asked 422 Hungarian FL learners of English to assess native and non-native language teachers. Native language teachers were praised for their conversational skills and their abilities to conduct dynamic and lively lessons. They were perceived as having friendly personalities and being linguistic role models. In contrast, non-native language teachers were deemed to be better equipped to explain grammar-related concepts and to supply the

exact lexical items needed by the learners who either did not know them or were unable to retrieve the words from their mental dictionary. Undoubtedly, both groups enrich the learning experience, in an identifiably different way though (similar results were obtained by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005) in the Basque Country).

To our knowledge, no such tests assessing foreign language teacher linguistic, not methodological, competences, have been created, implemented, and presented in Poland. The report prepared by the Institute of Educational Studies (Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych, IBE) included only a description of teacher competences, not their actual assessment whereas the IBE quality control of language teaching was based on the monitoring of the teachers' work. In practice, it predominantly involved the evaluation of syllabi, teachers' self-assessment, and their declaration of hours worked. This is all the more important in the current FL context where teaching is done mostly by non-native speaker teachers (over 80% as per Canagarajah, 1999). Without a doubt, the number is higher in the context of foreign language teaching in Poland where less than 5% of English teachers are native speakers (Personal communication, 2017). Nicholas (1993) maintains that, in general, the training received by future non-native foreign language teachers in the course of their undergraduate studies is neither sufficient nor appropriate. Consequently, they are not satisfactorily prepared for classroom interaction and often fall short of students' expectations. Likewise, the training they undergo does not equip them with relevant pragmatic and discourse competences. We argue that this insufficient training deprives them of being linguistically competent right from the start, sets the tone for their professional career and, ultimately, may be one of the prerequisites for language attrition. Undeniably, there are numerous factors crucial in maintaining a desirable linguistic outcome. For the purpose of the present study we turn to an under-researched area and examine language attrition as an element contributing to the deterioration of FL teacher linguistic competences.

Language Attrition

By nature, languages are intuitively associated with the processes of acquisition, learning, speech production or linguistic use. In other words, there is a strong tendency to associate languages with a gain and with managing rather than maintaining linguistic resources in different contexts. Therefore, it seems less intuitive to think of them in terms of breakdown, loss or attrition. Unrightfully so, as language attrition is very much a linguistic reality (Szupica-

Pyrzanowska, 2016). In the present study attrition is understood as longstanding loss rather than temporary losses of linguistic material (Brown, 1994) which is triggered by “disuse, lack of input or reduced input” (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010) and characterized by, but not limited to, the following features: shrinking phonetic inventories, simpler phonetic rules, lack of grammatical flexibility, smaller lexical repertoires (Holmes, 2008).

Likewise, in our definition of attrition we assume the loss of the linguistic material that was previously possessed by language teachers and we argue for the absence of the linguistic knowledge that was once present, tangible and can no longer compete with the other, more frequently used linguistic system, in this case the L1. Attrition relates to a gradual change in one’s linguistic behavior triggered by a lack of contact with a community in which the language is spoken natively. The severed or less frequent contact with the community results in one’s inability to maintain fluency or in a loss of language fluency and its proficient use. This is fuel for the argument that in order to be maintained, languages have to be constantly supplied with linguistic material. Otherwise, they erode (Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2016).

As in the case of language acquisition, language attrition is a dynamic and non-linear process (Schmid, Köpke, & de Bot, 2013) consisting of different transitional phases. We propose the following intermediate stages along the continuum from acquisition to attrition, or from knowing a language to knowing it less. The first stage, stagnation, is distinguished in terms of language inertia triggered by a lack of regular contact with language or its infrequent use. At this stage most foreign language users let their skills lapse. If prolonged, stagnation may lead to a phase of little variation where no new linguistic material is introduced to the speaker’s repertoire. Consequently, FL users reach a plateau and cease further development. An extended plateau, in turn, may trigger language regression which, if sustained, could be a prerequisite to language attrition. Considering the FL circumstances, non-pathological language attrition should never result in no knowledge at all. Instead, it is rather likely to lead to the so called critical threshold, a level beyond which knowledge will resist further deterioration and will be stored in “permastore” understood as extremely long-term or lasting memory (Neisser, 1984). Hitherto, in the literature there is no consensus regarding the exact trajectory of the forgetting curve. On the one hand, the forgetting curve begins with a plateau during which language competence is unaffected (Weltens & Cohen, 1989). Proponents of a different view state that lack of contact with language triggers forgetting which quickly becomes fixed and stabilizes (Bahrick, 1984).

Thus far, the following three attrition scenarios predominated:

1. An immigrant who is a speaker of the language not spoken natively in the new country of residence and who slowly loses his native language.

2. A speaker of a language who lives in a place where a different language is considered more prestigious or sought-after.
3. A learner who studied a language at school and who loses the language owing to the lack of opportunity to practice it outside classroom (Reilly, 1988).

The aforementioned examples, however, do not include foreign language teachers. Following Cook (2015), we relate to foreign language teachers as foreign language users. A non-native speaker teacher is a foreign language user who has acquired another language. Hence, the non-native speaker teacher is looked up to and revered by the students. After all, “he learned the language by a similar route to the students” (Cook, 2015) and can resort to the students’ L1 whenever necessary and just like his students, the non-native speaker teacher has to make an effort so as to maintain his foreign language skills (Llurda, 2005; Macaro, 2005). Although FL teachers are not a homogenous population, they, nevertheless, share certain features. For instance, they may rarely, if ever, go beyond the curriculum, they may have a restricted contact with the FL community, they may not use the language they teach on a regular basis, their language may be reduced to a metalinguistic jargon, they may speak their L1 in FL classes, they may represent similar acquisition paths. In their case “a break with a previously established linguistic tradition [that] leads to reduction in linguistic form and the creation of gaps in the individual’s linguistic repertoire in that language” (Andersen, 1982, p. 87) is not as spectacular as that in the case of emigrants whose linguistic contact is often abruptly severed. Non-pathological attrition may not be immediately obvious and easy to detect because speakers can use different compensatory strategies to veil its appearance (Herdina & Jessner, 2002). Even though paths leading to attrition are different in FL teachers and emigrants, the outcome and the consequences of the process are similar.

Despite the fact that literature on the assessment of foreign language teacher competence is emergent, the literature on non-native teacher language attrition is scarce. Włosowicz (2016) investigated 39 L1 Polish foreign language teachers of English who were asked to complete a grammar test and fill out a questionnaire in which they reflected on their ways to prevent attrition and presented their attitudes towards correctness. Analysis of the results indicated that the vocabulary part of the test was done the most successfully, while articles and reported speech were the most difficult. The results obtained from the grammar test were not compatible with the participants’ assessment of the task difficulty. For instance, reported speech was not regarded as challenging despite the high error rate on sentences including this syntactic structure. Włosowicz concluded by stating that, even though it seems counterintuitive, teaching a foreign language could be a source of language attrition among language teachers. The reasons for the loss of language in the formal context are twofold, a regular contact with students’ errors and the need to adjust language to the learners’ level.

Finally, in the present study we propose a three-way paradigm shift.

1. Pathological attrition (aphasia) → non-pathological attrition (healthy language users).
2. L1/L2 → FL.
3. Learner's language attrition → teacher's language attrition.

The Present Study

Aim

The overall aim of the present study was to investigate and assess the level of awareness of language attrition among FL teachers of English in Polish primary schools. Specifically, we intended to inquire about the respondents' beliefs, views, opinions on issues related to language attrition. Also, we queried whether FL teachers relate the phenomenon in question to their own language competence.

Method

In our diagnostic study, the participants were requested to complete a survey in pen-and-paper format. The anonymous questionnaire was given in Polish and included seven open- and closed-ended questions. The survey was not applied during lessons. Two dates were offered to participate in the study. The questionnaire was administered during two different testing sessions given on two different days arranged to meet everyone's schedule. The participants voluntarily signed up for the date of their choice. No specific time was allotted to complete the questionnaire, so the participants took as much time as they needed to address the questions.

Population

Twenty-one elementary school teachers (mean age 29 years) were included in the study. All were females. All had a B.A. in elementary education and were pursuing their M.A. degree in language teaching. They were second-year extramural students of the University of Warsaw. On average, all had at least 7 years of teaching experience. They represented different regions of Poland, both urban and rural.

Results

Question 1

Is knowledge of foreign languages susceptible to loss? (see Figure 1).

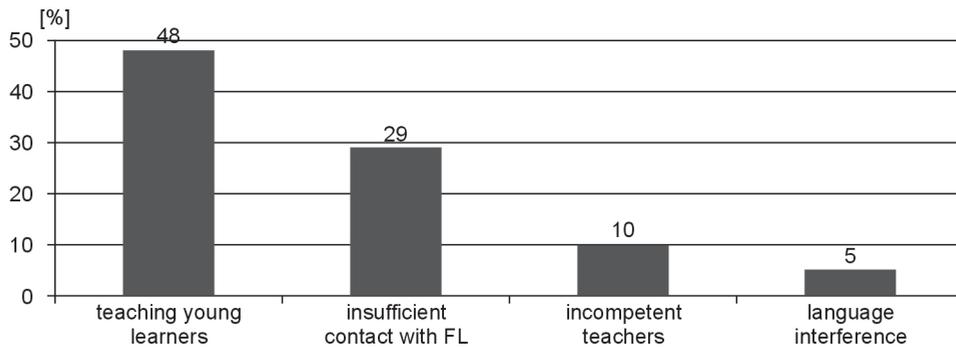


Figure 1. Reasons for language loss.

All 21 teachers confirmed that the knowledge of a foreign language is undoubtedly susceptible to loss. The following issues were identified as potential reasons for attrition: teaching young children (48%), insufficient contact with the foreign language (29%), incompetent teachers (10%), and language interference (5%).

Question 2

Which language aspects are prone to loss? (see Figure 2).

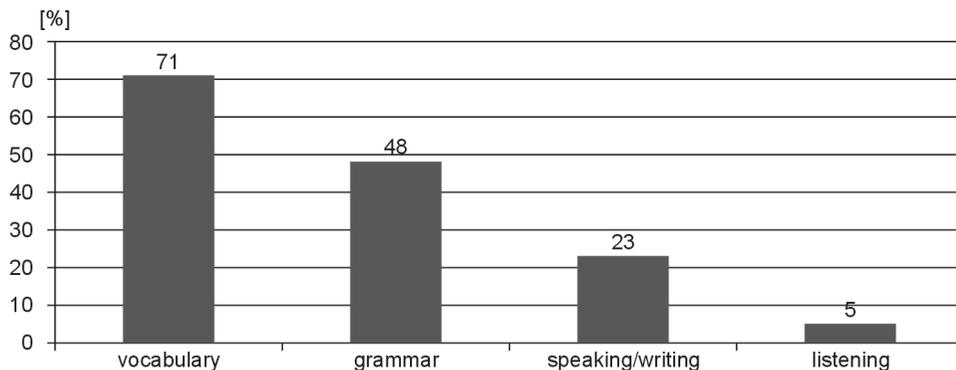


Figure 2. Language areas/skills prone to loss.

As many as 71% of the surveyed teachers claimed that of all language aspects vocabulary is most prone to loss, 48% identified grammar, 23% – speaking and writing, while 5% considered listening as particularly susceptible to loss. As for grammar components prone to loss, the participants listed the Third Conditional, Past Perfect, and other complex tenses. In addition, vocabulary both in speaking and writing was regarded as susceptible to attrition along with productive skills in general.

Question 3

Which aspects of a language are resistant to loss? (see Figure 3).

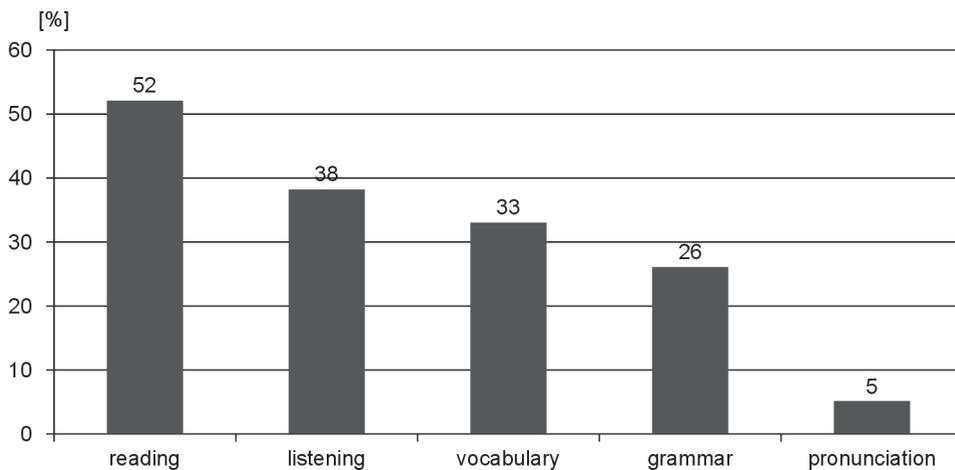


Figure 3. Language areas/skills resistant to loss.

The aspects of a foreign language which are most resistant to loss are, in the opinion of the respondents: reading (52%), listening (38%), vocabulary (33%), grammar (26%), and pronunciation (5%). The participants emphasized that most resistant to loss are those elements of language which are most frequently used, such as everyday vocabulary and simple grammar.

Question 4

How could one prevent foreign language loss? (see Figure 4).

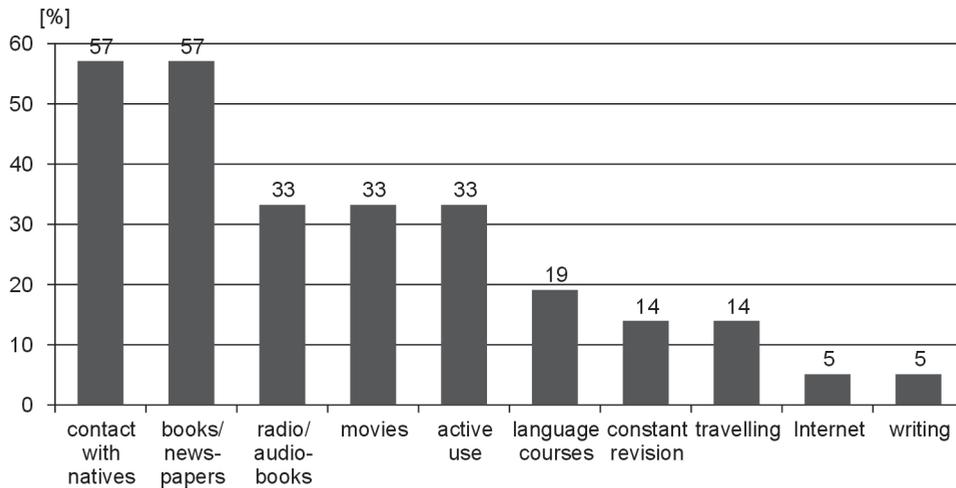


Figure 4. What prevents language loss?

The participants specified several ways of preventing foreign language loss, the most important of which are contact with native speakers (57%) and reading books/newspapers (57%). The respondents were of the opinion that watching films in a foreign language (33%), listening to the radio and audiobooks (33%) and, in general, using the language actively (33%) warrants its retention. They also recommended taking part in language courses (19%), travelling (14%), using Internet resources (5%), and practicing writing in a foreign language (5%).

Question 5

Do foreign language teachers have to constantly work on their language skills? If so, why? If not, why not? (see Figure 5).

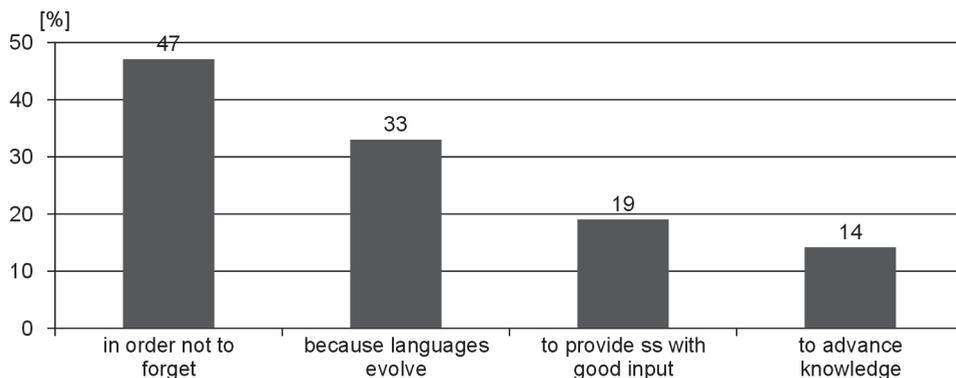


Figure 5. Why do FL teachers have to work on their language competence?

All participants confirmed that foreign language teachers constantly have to work on their language skills. Their responses can be grouped into four categories: (1) “[I]n order not to forget the language” (47%); (2) “[B]ecause languages change and evolve” (33%); (3) “[I]n order to provide students with good input” (19%); and (4) “[T]o advance students’ as well as one’s own linguistic knowledge” (14%).

Question 6

How should foreign language teachers further develop their language competences? (see Figure 6).

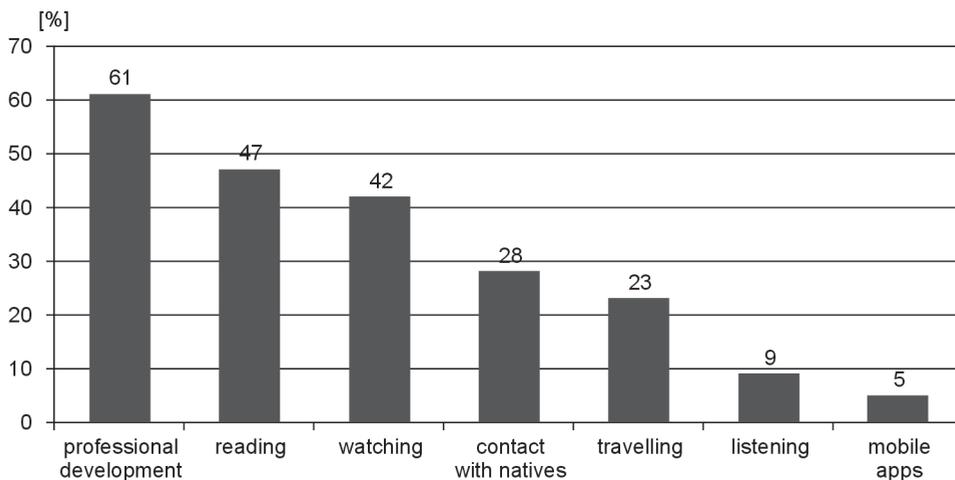


Figure 6. How should FL teachers further develop their language competences?

The participants identified several ways to develop foreign language competences, the most important of which was professional development (61%). According to the respondents teachers should also develop their language skills through reading (47%), as well as watching television and films in a foreign language (42%). Surprisingly, only 28% of the respondents listed contact with native speakers as a preventive measure. Subsequently, the respondents listed travelling (23%), practicing listening in a foreign language (9%), and using mobile apps (5%).

Question 7

Are foreign language teachers’ language skills prone to loss? (see Figure 7).

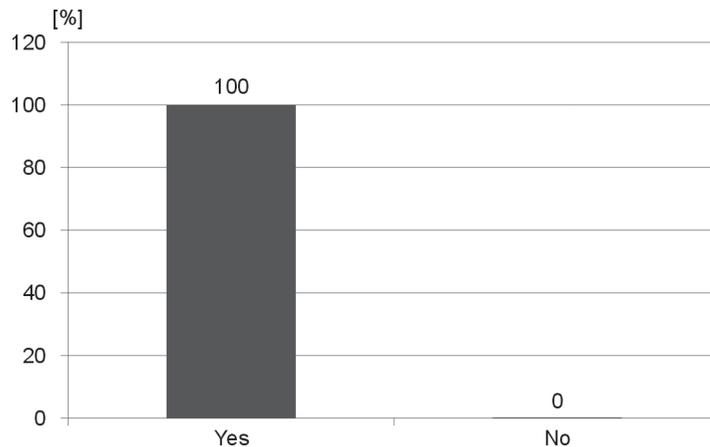


Figure 7. Are foreign language teachers' language skills prone to loss?

All participants admitted that foreign language teachers' language skills definitely are prone to loss. However, they declared that they were neither aware of language attrition nor related it to their own competences prior to the survey.

Discussion

We acknowledge that the sample size in our diagnostic study might have been too small to draw any major conclusions. It was, however, representative enough in a sense that certain patterns did emerge regardless of the sample size.

In Question 1, we inquired whether the participants confirm that foreign language knowledge is susceptible to loss. Surprisingly, the preliminary analysis revealed that nearly half of the participants immediately related the question to their own profession/language experience and stated that teachers working with different age groups could be differently prone to language attrition. This finding is alarming for two different reasons. First, according to our respondents, those who teach children are more likely to attrite than the teachers whose learners are older. Needless to say, the process of acquisition or knowledge accumulation has physiological manifestations. In general, teaching is manifested by passing on knowledge and, thus, leaving traces behind. Teachers have a privilege not only to influence young minds but also to activate different parts of their students' brains. In order to achieve that, teachers need to provide their learners with input whose frequency is important. Further, abstract notions have to be broken down into cognitively manageable units that are easy to parse. Once understood, internalized and rehearsed, the abstract notions can be com-

mitted to long-term memory and retrieved whenever necessary. The brain is changed by the experience. Brain regions that are frequently used grow bigger owing to the formation of additional connections among neurons. In this sense, learning can be equated with creating neuro-traces either as changes in the existing connections between neurons or as new neural connections. Earlier in life, learning proceeds more swiftly and effortlessly due to brain plasticity. Childhood is a time of significant brain growth. Cortical grey matter is at its highest volume in the prepubertal population (Mills et al., 2016). The grey matter contains those areas of the brain that supervise muscle control and sensory perception (e.g., speech, hearing, seeing, memory) which are crucial in the process of learning (Miller et al., 1980). The child constantly absorbs new things, shows an inquisitive spirit, embarks on new adventures, explores and experiments in the environment. This window of opportunity eventually „closes.” Consequently, the educational system should protect, not fail, very young FL learners whose natural aptitude has to be supported by the teachers who understand the population they work with.

Second, considering the responses given by the participants in the present study, the teachers whose learners are young are not necessarily motivated to work on their own language competence. We speculate that this fact might partially stem from teachers’ failure to realize their students’ full potential and cognitive needs. The quality of an early language exposure is indeed important, though. Au et al. (2002) investigated the acquisition of Spanish by college students who had overheard the language as children and in some cases knew a few words. The participants neither spoke nor understood Spanish and were evaluated as “heritage language” acquirers. The “overhearers” were compared to students who had no exposure to Spanish before the age of 14. The members of both groups were native English speakers studying Spanish as an L2. The test results indicated that the “overhearers” acquired a native like accent while the other students did not. The mere exposure to the language meaningfully present in their linguistic environment during formative years resulted in phonological attainment reached years later. Furthermore, some participants in our study pointed to incompetent teachers as a possible source of language loss on the part of the students. A different perspective is assumed here. By doing so, the respondents related to their own experience of language learning which may still resonate with them.

As for Question 2, a number of issues arose in relation to language areas/skills which are prone to attrition. The respondents identified speaking and writing as language areas susceptible to loss. This is in line with the findings that receptive rather than productive skills are more resistant to loss (Bahrlick 1984; Hansen 2011). The vast majority of the participants pointed to vocabulary with low frequency of use and complex syntactic structures. In both cases the underlying assumption is that the frequency of use is a determining factor of

language attrition. The category of low-frequency items has been identified as “high attrition sites” (Preston, 1982). In Question 3, we asked which aspects of a language are resistant to loss. The vast majority of the participants identified receptive skills, reading and listening, as less susceptible, which is again consistent with Bahrick (1984) and Hansen (2011). Everyday vocabulary and simple syntactic structures were also characterized as loss resistant. Some participants conveyed that well-rehearsed elements, whether lexical or syntactic, are much more easily committed to long-term memory than their poorly-rehearsed counterparts. Once more, the frequency of use emerged as a decisive factor in language retention.

The next question related to the ways in which one can avoid language loss. There was a myriad of preventive measures listed by the participants, from contact with native speakers, the active use of a foreign language or attending language courses through a constant revision, to reading books/newspapers, watching movies, and travelling. All of the aforementioned measures were to guarantee an active use of a foreign language. Some participants elaborated on their survey responses and added that it is imperative to stay in touch with the language at all cost and that one cannot afford to lose contact with the language one studies. The preventive measures distinguished by the participants in the present study overlap with the strategies counterbalancing attrition observed by Włosowicz (2016).

The participants’ responses to Question 5 can be divided into those that pertained to the teachers’ own language (e.g., “to advance one’s knowledge,” “in order not to forget”) and those referring to learners (e.g., “to provide students with good input”). The teachers not only acknowledged that languages are dynamic entities which evolve and change over time, but they also emphasized the need to constantly update their knowledge of the English language. Their descriptive answers that followed were humble, reflective, and revealed that the respondents understand knowledge of language to be a continuum along which one can fluctuate. Below, we present some of the most profound opinions voiced by our respondents:

Every teacher is also a student.

Constant effort is required if one is to become an expert.

I experienced that and I know now how quickly one can lose access to previously gained knowledge.

Language loss in teachers is more severe than in language learners.

Language learning never ends.

[author’s translation]

Taking into consideration the answers to Question 6, it is apparent that the participants misunderstood it. Here, we asked how foreign language teachers

should further develop their language competences. As many as 68% of the respondents replied that they improve their language competences through professional training (e.g., conferences, workshops). They seem to have mistaken professional development for language development. The responses appear compatible with what some of them stated off the record, though. Unofficially, our participants admitted that they learn about new methodologies, they participate in workshops and conferences, but they do not necessarily make an effort so as to maintain their language competence through a regular contact with the language they teach. They conceded that while speaking the language in class, they rarely go beyond the subject-specific metalinguistic terminology and classroom register. In addition, they do not expand on their lexical repertoires either. They described their lexical acquisition as sporadic and incidental. It is evident that they do not attrite professionally as teachers but linguistically as language users.

Finally, in Question 7 we narrowed down the scope of our inquiry and asked specifically whether foreign language teacher language competence could be compromised. The participants unanimously responded „yes” to the question. Some teachers admitted that the survey made them realize that attrition applies not only to their learners but to their own language skills as well. Once again, the participants drew attention to the fact that particularly those foreign language teachers who teach (young) children have to be vigilant. Elementary school teachers are more likely to cease their language development. After all, foreign language teachers cannot be expected to interact with language learners of a limited linguistic control in the same way they communicate with (near) native-speakers (Elder, 1993c). FL teachers claim to simplify the English they use in class for their students’ sake. In turn, this simplified in-class communication together with the exposure to the errors made by students do not always foster teacher’s language development. As a remedy, the respondents proposed teaching students of different age, which, in their view, will help teachers maintain their language competences and will motivate them to speak better in class. Language attrition could be triggered by a lack of motivation or a burnout effect, as lack of motivation is known to correlate with language loss (Mehotcheva, 2010; Schmid & Dusseldorp, 2010). Like the participants in the study done by Włosowicz, our respondents complained of the administrative work they are required to do and lack of flexibility on the part of school principles.

As a final point, we wish to address the length of teaching experience. The participants in our survey had, on average, seven years of professional experience. Considering it from the perspective of attrition, seven years of teaching suffice to experience language slowdown. In some measure, this is in keeping with Bahrck (1984) who tested 773 individuals speaking Spanish as their L2. They differed in terms of acquisition paths and incubation periods, the time

during which they had no contact with Spanish. The incubation periods ranged from a few months to over 25 years of non-active learning. A greater intensity of attrition has been observed during early years of language non-use (0–3) than subsequent years (5–25). In light of what Bahrck reported, the results of the present study appear disturbing because, unlike the Spanish learners in Bahrck’s experiment, our participants are expected to use the language actively. Of course, the extent to which they do so remains to be determined. We can only speculate that however much language they use is apparently not enough to sustain it. Novice teachers should be informed that initially, attrition proceeds rapidly and reaches a plateau at later stages. The first few years of teaching are, thus, crucial for long-term language retention. Foreign language teachers have to be supported in their professional endeavors. We aim to reach out to the community of foreign language teachers and draw their attention to the phenomenon of language attrition, inform them about ways to prevent it and recognize its early stages not only in their students, but in their own language production as well. Non-native language teachers have to rethink their own language competences. Foreign languages have to be maintained on a regular basis or to state it in Di Martino and Di Sabato’s terms—language maintenance should not be of “a once-in-while nature but rather [...] a life-long form of training” (2012, p. 77).

Taken as a whole, in the present study we made the following observations: (1) the level of language attrition awareness among FL teachers is low; (2) FL teachers do not seem to always distinguish between language and professional competence; (3) FL teachers are more likely to relate attrition to their students’ rather than to their own language skills; (4) teachers who teach preschool and kindergarten learners are more prone to attrition than FL teachers whose students are teenagers and adults; (5) those who teach young FL learners report to be less motivated to maintain their language skills. Undoubtedly, more research is needed to examine the relation between lack of motivation and teachers’ language attrition which for now remains understudied.

Conclusion

The benefits of studies investigating language attrition in FL teachers are at least twofold: (1) The present study and studies alike stress the importance of supporting FL teachers in their professional endeavors particularly by providing them with more opportunities to work on their language competence; (2) By raising teachers’ awareness of the problem, we aim to prevent FL loss and emphasize that changes are needed in teacher education programs so as

to include the issue of attrition, self-assessment of one's language competence, and strategies promoting regular language maintenance.

Moreover, most foreign language teaching programs tend to exclusively concentrate on improving teachers' professional (methodological) competence while ignoring the importance of their actual use of language (Cullen, 1994). It goes without saying that language improvement initiatives are not only expensive undertakings that require devoting considerable resources, but are also time-consuming in terms of development and implementation. By no means, it is an easy task. However, it is an imperative and urgent matter because insufficient FL teacher language competence may negatively influence their own self-confidence, sense of professionalism, and it may also prevent them from a skillful implementation of their methodological abilities, which in turn may obstruct learner progress. FL learners' success largely depends on their teacher's language and professional competences.

Lastly, in order to investigate non-native teacher language attrition it is imperative to first define the domain of teacher proficiency to understand what is being lost. We ought to determine whether teacher proficiency is different from other professional competences and establish if it is distinguishable from "general" language proficiency (Elder, 2001). Further, the underlying assumption of the present study also relates to the issue of an adequate teacher language assessment. This, in turn, relates to the dilemma that teacher language proficiency is not defined in a systematic and consistent way. According to Elder (2001), when designing tests measuring teacher language competence, we have to compromise between "real and ideal." It is challenging to design tests/measures which are genuinely representative of the target environment (Douglas, 2000). "The construct of teacher proficiency, is clearly multidimensional, and this poses problems for the interpretation and reporting of performance" (Swales, 1990, p. 52). What adds to the problem is the vastness of a possible classroom interaction or "allowable contributions" made by teachers.

The present diagnostic study is just a preview of what we intend to accomplish longitudinally. Our long-term goal is to organize workshops on language attrition for FL teachers and teachers-to-be and to implement online measures (e.g., eye tracking, ERP) which could determine the level of attrition and in turn inform pedagogy. Meanwhile, it is necessary to rethink pedagogy and reset priorities. Non-native language teacher linguistic competence and attrition merit further attention and examination to warrant long-term solutions. We begin to scratch the surface, but even now at the preliminary stage it becomes evident that what emerges is only the tip of a multilayered iceberg.

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**Geht das auch sie an?
Die Fremdsprachenlehrer angesichts des Phänomens des
Verlusts der Sprachkenntnisse**

Zusammenfassung

Der nicht pathologische Verlust der Sprache wurde schon in Bezug auf Heimatsprache und Zweitsprache genau erforscht und beschrieben (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012). Wir haben aber immer noch unzureichende Kenntnisse über eine andere Population, die durch Verlust von Sprachkenntnissen gefährdet ist, nämlich die Fremdsprachenlehrer, die keine Muttersprachler sind. Die Fremdsprachenlehrer, welche alltags gegen fehlende Fortschritte bei ihren Schülern ankämpfen, können auch einer anderen Herausforderung ausgesetzt werden, nämlich fehlender Weiterentwicklung ihrer eigenen Sprachkenntnisse. So ist auch diese Population in den Forschungen zum Verlust der Sprachkenntnisse zu berücksichtigen. In vorliegender diagnostischer Untersuchung bemühen sich die Verfasserinnen zu ergründen, inwiefern die Fremdsprachenlehrer sich über den Sprachverlust im Klaren sind und in welchem Maße das Problem sie selbst angeht. Der Anlass zur diagnostischen Untersuchung waren die während ihrer vieljährigen Hochschularbeit mit Fremdsprachenlehrern angesammelten Meinungen. Die Verfasserinnen gingen davon aus, dass sich die Fremdsprachenlehrer in der zu unterrichteten Fremdsprache ausgebrannt fühlen können oder auch einem Rückgang ihrer linguistischen Fähigkeiten unterliegen. An der Untersuchung nahmen 21 Fremdsprachenlehrer (Durchschnittsalter von 29 J.) teil, die einen anonymen Fragebogen mit geschlossenen und offenen Fragen ausfüllen sollten. Die Rohanalyse offenbart die Gründe des Verlustes von Sprachkenntnissen bei Fremdsprachenlehrern und suggeriert die Richtungen der etwaigen künftigen Forschungen.

Schlüsselwörter: Fremdsprachenunterricht, Verlust der Sprachkenntnisse (eng.: language attrition), Fremdsprachenlehrer