

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: DIFFICULTIES AND IMPROVEMENT OF THE STUDY PROCESS

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Abstract. *The idea about knowing well any foreign language is very inspirational. People who know two or more foreign languages are admired and give people a hope to learn a new language easily. Consequently, this nice idea ends with the difficulties that students face while learning a new language. Only the infinitive desire could help student to learn something new. Attempts are really important thing in learning language, but difficulties can stop and isolate from the learning process. Scientists constantly have been estimating various kinds of learning difficulties and people who are undergoing difficulties of their studies. Frequently students face with academic failures, but according to the scholars, there is a way to avoid them – making learning more modernized by incorporating various innovative technologies as a motivational tool.*

Teacher's role, without any concerns, has a great influence on a person's life. Intellectual development starting with the primary classes to the university auditoriums and even future career largely depends on a teacher, who is responsible for providing valuable information and deciding on the methods as well as motivational tools to be applied.

The research and data acquired revealed the students' attitude towards learning of foreign language. It was noted that it is a very complicated and laborious procedure requiring long time and sustained efforts. During the process of foreign language acquisition, as the research results demonstrate, students confront with variety of difficulties. The respondents noted that the most topical difficulties are as follows: poor knowledge from secondary school, lack of practice, inefficient time management, etc. Therefore, in order to achieve prodigious results, the process of efficient language acquisition has to incorporate new educational trends, innovative study methods and practices, and appropriate motivational tools. Students participating in the survey specified that they would be satisfied by participating in modern innovative teaching and learning activities and having more contact hours for their lectures, and although the role of motivation cannot be denied.

Keywords: *foreign language learning/teaching, teaching/learning methods, learning difficulties, improvement of study process.*

Introduction

The knowledge of foreign language(s) has become one of common features of a person in a modern society. When we talk about the foreign language proficiency we often have in mind proficiency in English due to its World

Language status. But there are regions on the Earth, like Latin America or part of Asia, where its title of being global is not quite palpable. Actually, three world languages are distinguished – English, Spanish and French, and some other with several stipulations. The knowledge of at least two of them is mostly dictated by the labour market, international communication and by tendencies, both political and cultural, which make the national borders blurred (Parišauskienė & Jankauskienė, 2012).

For this reason a young person who seeks higher education certainly has a pressing task to acquire any foreign language(s). Statistics in Lithuania shows positive tendency of foreign language usage. English is the most popular foreign language to be learned today. It is spoken by 30 % of total population and 80 % of the youth (Languages in Lithuania (2011)). Today English is the language Lithuanians expect foreigners to know, so it is widely used in modern museums, hotels, tourist signs and city/resort restaurant menus. As the "top language" of the "prestigious West", it also became fashionable for some key local trademarks and popular songs. Spoken by some 70 % of the population, Russian is still the most popular second language in Lithuania (Languages in Lithuania (2011)), although this is declining due to the needs of students and educational system, the fact is that pupils at secondary schools and even at higher education institutions are entitled to select the languages to be studied. Beside Russian, other languages are considered to be more useful and popular in the modern digital world. German (spoken by 8 % of the population) held popularity as the 2nd foreign language (after Russian, instead of English) (Languages in Lithuania (2011)), but the situation could be improved by expanding projects with German speaking countries or developing global business.

Relevance and topicality of the problem. European Council pays huge attention to the language and plurilingualism policy, it focuses on the promotion of multilingualism and languages learning in European context. The experts of Council emphasise that process of languages learning and their usage has to involve entire population and that should lead to the preservation of cultural, social, intellectual and political elite, and on the contrary, it has to be available for every ordinary person (Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education (2010)).

Foreign language competence is closely related to education possibilities and professional career opportunities. Foreign language importance is highlighted by majority of EU acts and documents. For instance, a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000) determines new basic skills, which are significantly important for active participation in knowledge society and economical fields. After realizing of own potential and “big picture” it is not enough to have generic skills developed; furthermore, new capabilities have to be acquired, such as a new foreign language and computer literacy, etc. Due to constant digital development

and new technologies used in daily and professional spheres, educational systems deeply concerned about new skills development, and it is obvious that competent specialists have to meet the requirements of labour market and appropriate education, knowledge and skills give them competitive advantage. Council Resolution on a European strategy of multilingualism (2010) stresses the importance of foreign language skills development closely related to intercultural competence and their cohesion with abilities to be universal in various national and international contexts “significant efforts should still be made to promote language learning and to value the cultural aspects of linguistic diversity at all levels of education and training, while also improving information on the variety of European languages and their dissemination across the world”. (Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education (2010)). According to the EU Council the role of multilingualism and foreign language learning is relevant for a modern professional citizen, who demonstrates willingness to be active participant of global business. Lifelong learning accentuates that age and motivation is not a limit. Everyone can find appropriate reason and place for education, and besides that, a responsibility of a modern teacher is to inspire and lead people, the youth to right direction and stimulate their inner motivation. On November 2005 the European Commission issued an announcement, which strongly propagates multilingualism in the European Union (UE). (The European Union strategy for multilingualism and acquaintance with foreign languages in Lithuania.(2005)). The member states were suggested to teach at least two foreign languages at a very young age. Language acquisition is related to European politics; respectively, development of foreign language literacy needs to be improved.

In 2014 education, youth, culture and sport council provided conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences (Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences (2014)). Where it was stated that linguistic diversity is a fundamental component of European culture and intercultural dialogue and the ability to communicate in a language other than one's mother tongue is acknowledged to be one of the key competences which citizens should seek to acquire. Adopt and improve measures aimed at promoting multilingualism and enhancing the quality and efficiency of language learning and teaching, including by teaching at least two languages in addition to the main language(s) of instruction from an early age and by exploring the potential of innovative approaches to the development of language competences.

Following the analysis of the EU documents regarding multilingualism and foreign language acquisition the necessity and process of foreign language literacy development is a key priority of European Council and relationships with the rest world have to be expanded starting from acquiring and strengthening of

foreign language skills required by informational age and rapidly changing situation.

Study problem may be formulated as follows: despite new requirements of modern society and rapidly growing innovative technologies students in higher education institutions still confront with foreign language learning difficulties and handling of problematic learning and teaching process relies on appropriate students' motivation and elimination of the obstacles. That is considered to be partially teachers' responsibility, but on contrary, students have to find particular strategies to deal with lack of motivation and inner problems independently.

Object of research – detection of foreign language learning difficulties.

Aim of research – to investigate the foreign language learning difficulties, and the strategies of the study process improvement.

Goals of research:

- To analyze the basic foreign language learning difficulties;
- To investigate the benefit of traditional methods and innovative strategies, which can help to eliminate foreign language difficulties and improve the study process;

Methods: analysis of the legal documents and scientific literature sources, generalization, content analysis and survey.

Foreign language learning difficulties

Due to fast pace of our modern life, students can experience learning difficulties studying foreign language. Various studies were presented by foreign and Lithuanian scholars. Skehan (1991) analyzed differences of the learners participating in the process of the second foreign language acquisition. Barkauskienė (2015) and Galvydytė (2017) provided valuable information and recommendations how to detect foreign language problems and what strategies might be used in order to improve study process. Žindžiuvienė (2000), Bagdonas and Jankauskienė (2010), Tuomaitė (2014) presented the data acquired implemented surveys in Lithuanian higher education institutions that reveals students attitude towards foreign language difficulties and necessity to improve the study process. Žegunienė et.al (2014) studied and researched the foreign language acquisition process and difficulties that students confront during the study process. Learning difficulties and peculiarities of foreign language methodology were analyzed by Griffiths and Oxford (2014). Reviewing the results of surveys and the theoretical material provided by various scholars and pedagogues on the learning difficulties, it is obvious that difficulties arising from the foreign language learning can have significant impact on education and acquisition of foreign language. Learning difficulties, affect the way information is learned and processed. In general, a student may be diagnosed with learning

difficulties where there is a lack of achievement at age and ability level, or a large discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability. Some teachers may conclude that students who confront with learning difficulties while learning foreign language are 'lazy', or 'just not trying hard enough'. Such students struggle to meet deadlines of their assignments and to demonstrate high achievements, but nevertheless the efforts used in reality teachers can see just poor skills and low assessment.

As Spengler (1995) notes the foreign language learning problems may be interrelated with personal features of a student, pedagogical competences of a teacher, application of various methods and managerial aspects implemented in an educational institution. Donath (1998) propose that language learning may be improved combined that with motivational factors. Furthermore, the other scholars Raasch (1982), Rampillon (1995) and Spengler (1995) state that learning difficulties are evaded if both the students and teachers demonstrate approach where foreign language is referred to as a integral system comprising linguistic elements, social requirements for appropriate communication in foreign language and norms applied to different methods of communication. If this system is not complete a student and/or a teacher confronts with learning difficulties that result in low achievement and insufficient learning/teaching.

With reference to the sources mentioned above, the learning difficulties, as they can be experienced by students who learn foreign language, may be divided into separate groups:

- Memory difficulties;
- Organisational difficulties;
- Writing difficulties;
- Visual processing difficulties;
- Reading difficulties;
- Auditory processing difficulties;
- Time management difficulties;
- Sensory distraction: an inability to screen out extraneous visual or auditory stimuli,
- Sensory overload: a heightened sensitivity to visual stimuli and sound; an inability to cope with busy environments.

Multiple challenges arise on the way towards fluency, and the obstacles for smooth learning might be distinguished into two categories: 1) internal (or psychological) and 2) external (or situational). Internal difficulties might be experienced when a student forms negative view to the learning process. That could be an initial disbelief in the final success, lack of motivation or creating labels about own capabilities based on wrong assumptions. External challenges

are situational and depend on a student's time schedule, financial situation, university course, area of living, access to the information, etc.

As Aufenanger (2006) emphasises, firstly students have to learn how to learn efficiently and avoid difficulties. Partly they are responsible for organization of learning process, but on contrary this process is almost impossible without assistance of a teacher who is entitled to manage learning/teaching process implementing or even developing new educational trends, learning/teaching methods and innovative strategies.

Improvement of the study process: traditional vs. innovative

The methodology of foreign language learning/teaching has been analyzed for centuries. Scholars analyze and demonstrate serious concern about integration of new and traditional methods in the process of foreign language learning. Griffiths and Oxford (2014) demonstrate concern about the foreign language learning/teaching methodology. Richards and Renandya (2002), Freeman and Richards (1996) analyzed how teacher has to be prepared for the foreign language teaching, and they reviewed the basic factors ensuring efficiency of the second foreign language acquisition process. Šiaučiukėnienė (2006) analyzed the organization and changes of learning/teaching process where integration of traditional and innovative methods has been reviewed, as foreign language learning has to comprise development of different language acquisition fields: writing, reading, speaking and listening. The unity of these skills might be expanded through integration of innovative strategies and combination with traditional activities performed during lessons. That could be challenging for teachers, because they have to be familiar with innovations used in education field and especially focus on foreign language acquisition. Continuous modernization and innovation processes change understanding of a teacher's role. Perception of a concept "a teacher" could be interpreted differently, as Šernas (2006) notes it is not a teacher's role to provide students with teaching material, nowadays teachers have to organize teaching process allowing students to use information and communication technologies themselves, because basic components of learning and teaching process is autonomy, independency and ability to work within comfortable environment. Informational and scientific sources are available for everyone, and it is not necessary to analyze paper versions of books or articles; beside that students have to be able to find suitable and efficient way of learning because a modern teacher is referred to as a guide or adviser who leads and directs students. Firstly, a teacher has to be proficient in computer literacy, innovations and acknowledge interrelation with foreign language learning/teaching. Žegunienė (2009) and Bijeikienė (2012) note that traditional teaching methods are passive and they do not play vital role achieving high learning outcomes. If high

expectations are desired traditional has to be combined with innovative. That is associated with both the methods and innovative approaches towards foreign language learning/teaching process. Innovative methods comprise new trends of activities, which are interactive and students have no longer to be just observers but to take active participation in simulations, presentations, on-line activities and virtual games, to use the Internet educational websites (forums, chatting rooms, blogs, etc.) and social or educational media platforms. Students may use the programmes Skype, Frype and other interactive applications, which help to search and communicate with the native foreign language speakers. Mobile applications are very beneficial for daily foreign language deepening due to constant repeating of material, new words and phrases. Sudžiuvienė and Tautavičienė (2011) accentuate deliberate transition from traditional methods and teaching strategies to more advanced technologies and innovative approaches. Application of innovative technologies was analyzed by Parišauskienė, Žegunienė (2013), Žegunienė et.al. (2014), the authors reviewed the principles of innovative technologies usage in foreign language learning and teaching process and their impact on students' achievements. A computer is the most common example of innovative devices used in learning/teaching process, and it is the most popular among teachers and students, specially deepening foreign language skills. Variety of devices can be used in foreign language acquisition. Modern educational tools such as an interactive board, an interactive table, tablets, interactive notebooks, iPads could be successfully integrated into learning/teaching process. These devices contribute to improvement of foreign language speaking, reading and writing skills and inspire/motivate students to active participants of the modern study process.

Combination of traditional methods and innovative strategies cannot be denied. Biletskaya (2003) emphasizes application of teacher-oriented, grammar translation method, aural-oral and oral-audio methods, reading methods and their combination with communicative, situational/natural context-oriented methods, where language can be learned and taught in real life situations. The author accentuated new methods of learning such as a "silent way" and community language learning, where students are treated not as students/learners but rather clients and they are entitled to learn getting teachers' advice or consultations and independently using various devices or interactive tools. Parišauskienė and Žegunienė (2013) highlighted the importance of combination of innovative and traditional methods. Due to rapid global and educational changes usage of new approaches make the study process more accessible, innovative and attractive for demanding students, who want to be ready for future professional challenges.

Methodology of Research

The research has been organized and performed in Klaipėda State University of Applied Sciences to investigate the difficulties that students confront with during the course of foreign language learning. The research was completed in March – April 2016. The target group was the 1st and the 2nd year students who study English as a foreign language (256 respondents), the instrument of research – a questionnaire form comprised 7 open and closed questions. The questions were formulated diagnostically aiming to investigate foreign language learning difficulties and strategies to eliminate them.

Analysis of foreign language learning difficulties

The respondents were asked to select from the provided list which foreign language learning difficulties they confront during the study process. Predominant difficulties are elucidated below in the Figure 1.

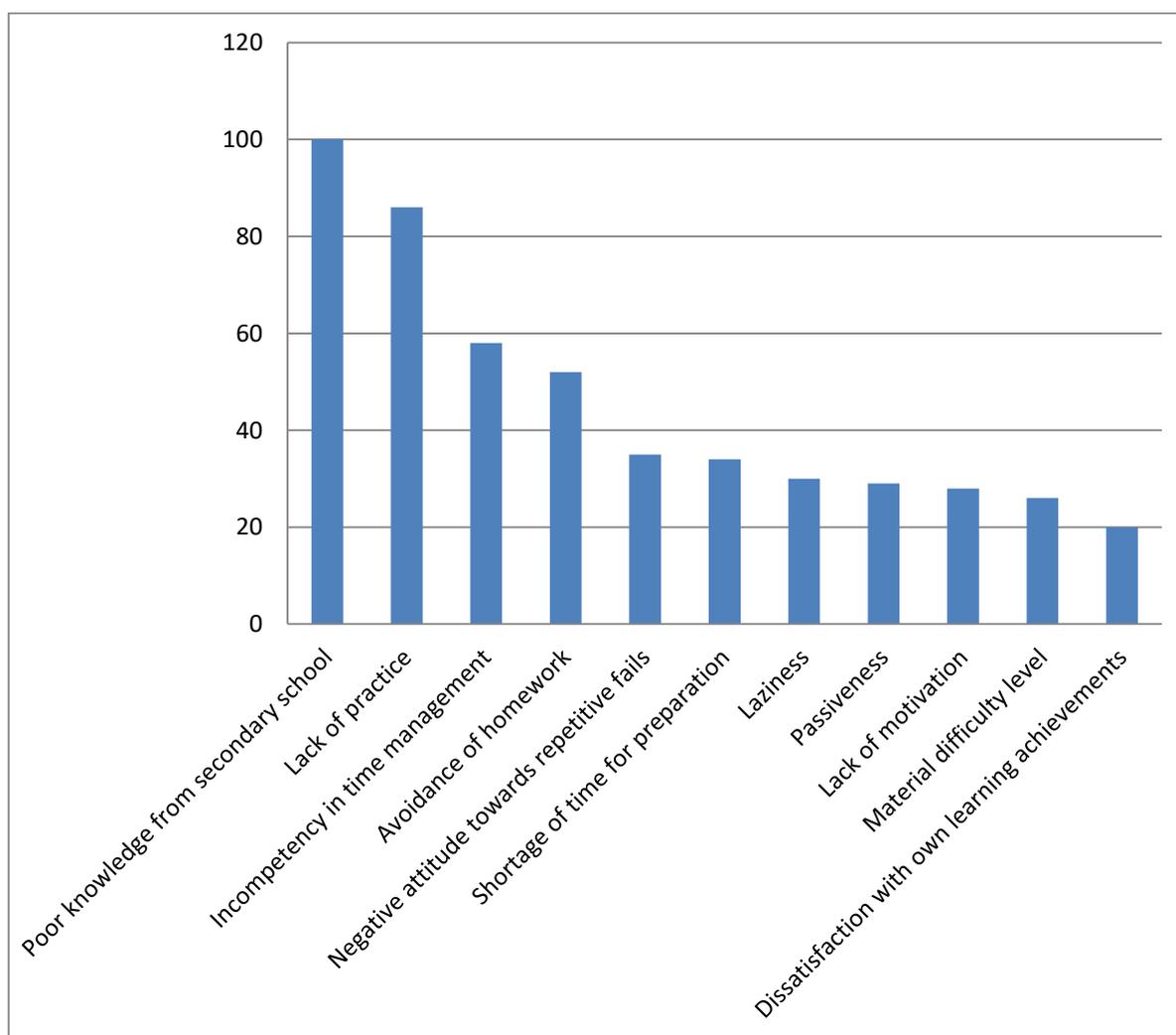


Figure 1 Foreign language learning difficulties

The respondents were presented with a list of possible learning difficulties, and they could select the most relevant. The selection was not limited. Having analyzed students answers the following might be concluded. Foreign language learning process is rather complicated for students because they indicated various difficulties. Herein the most common were presented. Majority of the respondents (100 %) indicated that they have poor knowledge from secondary school and continuing foreign language studies they don't feel competent and self-sufficient. Closely related difficulty is presented further – lack of practice. It was indicated by large majority of students (86 %). More than half of respondents are incompetent in time management (58 %) and avoid doing homework (52 %). The following difficulties were named by almost the third part of the interviewed respondents: negative attitude towards repetitive fails (35 %), shortage of time for preparation (34 %). Finally, the difficulties occurred due to negative personal features, such as laziness (30 %), passiveness (29 %) and lack of motivation (28 %). Lastly, the smaller group of the respondents was dissatisfied with own learning achievements (20 %) and that is referred to as a learning difficulty which prevents students from further successful learning.

As the research data reveal, the students confront with plenty of difficulties occurred during the course of foreign language learning. Some of them are originated from the secondary school (poor knowledge, lack of practice, avoidance of homework, high level of material) and inappropriate organization of learning/teaching process (inefficient time management, lack of time for preparation). Majority of indicated difficulties may be correlated with psychological condition or internal characteristics of the students (negative attitude, laziness, passiveness, no motivation and dissatisfaction).

Improvement of the study process

Further the respondents had a possibility to select from the list of suggested measures which could help them to confront with experienced difficulties and improve the foreign language study process. Results are presented below in the Figure 2.

Majority of the students (58 %) showed interest in presented variety of measures, which can be used during foreign language learning/teaching process. According to their expressed opinion that is the best way to enhance students' motivation and strengthen willingness to demonstrate their newly developed skills of foreign language. More contact hours were mentioned by slightly more than a half of the respondents (52 %). 46 % of the interviewed students need to have their motivation enhanced. More than third part of the students (38 %) indicated that they wish to have more tasks and assignments and almost the same number of students (34 %) require taking into consideration the needs of the learning

students. Respectively the smaller groups of the respondents appointed that it is important to make changes in timetable (22 %), non-formal education could help to cope with difficulties (16 %) and integrated lessons with other subjects studied at higher education institution (for instance, English lessons integrated into specialized courses of accounting fundamentals, business management, tourism administration, etc.) would improve current situation and would be beneficial for learning outcomes (13 %).

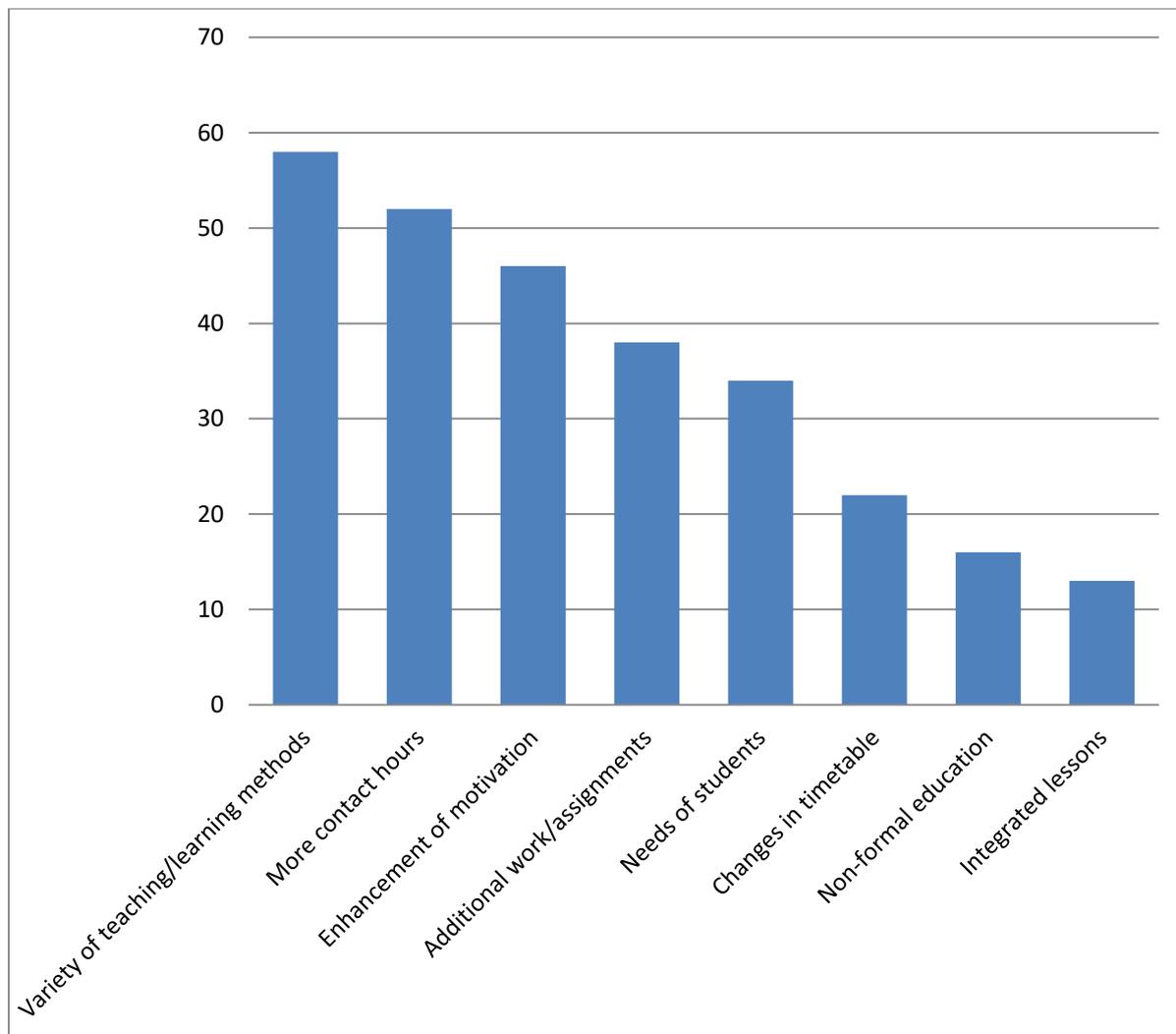


Figure 2 Measures for Improvement of the study process

As the research and data revealed students confront with the difficulties but they have own options how the foreign language learning and teaching processes could be improved and complemented with traditional methods (more contact hours, taking into consideration the needs of students, additional tasks, teacher-oriented method, grammar translation method, aural-oral and oral-audio methods, etc.) and innovative strategies (English lessons integrated into other courses,

usage of smart devices, interactive activities, newly adapted methods as “silent way”, community language learning, etc.). Mentioned factors may help students to master foreign language skills, to feel more self-confident and motivated. Such methods and strategies modernize learning/teaching process and make it available for every student.

Conclusions

Foreign language learning and teaching is a complex process and it has to be referred to as an integral system comprising elements and norms of communication. Due to this approach students and teachers bear responsibility for proper organization of learning/teaching process and efficient confrontation with experienced learning difficulties. Learning success and progress shouldn't be just teacher's responsibility; it has to be influenced by students – active participants of study process (consultations, independent work, active participation in activities, expressing own wishes and needs, etc.). Almost half of the mentioned learning difficulties arise from internal students' capabilities (time management, attitude, character features, etc.) but a fact that surrounding environment has no impact on learning/teaching process could not be denied. Modern academic community is engaged into exploration and usage of new study devices, methods and application of new approaches.

The research demonstrated positive situation where students suggested measures to be used for improvement of foreign language study process. Modern education system is open for innovations and interactive learning. Knowledge and skills could be acquired using computers, organizing integrated lessons and considering learning possibilities provided by different educational environment (natural and interactive). However, traditional learning/teaching methods (teacher-oriented method, grammar translation method, aural-oral and oral-audio methods) have to be related with innovative technologies (usage of smart devices and tools, interactive activities, etc.). They play important role enhancing students' motivation, creating comfortable learning environment.

Summary

Demand of knowing foreign language is precisely determined in EU legal documentation and acts. This issue is relevant for the citizens of whole Europe considering spheres of business, economics, professional and personal life. Currently the situation in world arena changes rapidly and it is influenced by changes in education system and labour market. Majority of the youth and senior people are engaged in international activities, projects and business, so that leads to new skills where foreign language is a key priority. Studying of foreign languages is very complicated and laborious procedure requiring long time and

sustained efforts. Therefore, in order to achieve prodigious results, the process of efficient language acquisition has obtained completely new approaches, study methods and practices. The modern studying approach demands planning and implementing of innovative teaching and learning activities. It cannot be opposed that the 21st century often called the information age, is bringing changes into traditional studying. Indeed the capability of applying of computer technology in teaching of foreign languages is almost infinitive. Consequently these innovations help students and teachers to deal with foreign language learning difficulties, and following the research data, it is presented that students are confident about arising difficulties and provide ideas on their efficient elimination.

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