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ESP SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND SELF-PERCEPTION ON SPEAKING AND WRITING

***Abstract:** The study explores the self-perception and attitudes of students in the Vocational High School for Mechanics and Electrotechnics in Lovech towards learning a second language (English) and seeks to describe the main drivers of students' desire to learn and achieve in the subject. It is split in two parts: the first one tracks the onset of students' first exposure to English, how and where they learn the language and what their perceived language expertise is at present, while the second part measures the students' actual skills and compares them to their self-perceptions and desire to learn. Then, the study explores the relationship between their self-efficacy and learning strategies and their academic achievements. It focuses on the two productive skills (speaking vs writing) as they are more difficult to acquire to an advanced level and the correct use of each of them is governed by completely different rules.*

***Keywords:** second language acquisition, speaking skills, writing skills, self-efficacy and motivation in the context of EFL*

Introduction

English as the 21st century language of the world

Nowadays, English is widely employed as a means of communication between people whose mother tongue and official country's languages are not even related to English. According to a publication by the British Council from 2013 the number of people with English as a native language is 373 million (source: <https://www.ethnologue.com/>), but the language is "...spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people – a quarter of the world's population." (native and non-native speakers), who make use of it in their daily work or free time interaction. In the same publication the Director of English and Exams at the British Council, Mark Robson, comments that by 2020 the number is expected to grow to nearly 2 billion. He further reflects on a survey conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2012, where nearly 70 percent of the executives confirmed that their employees "will need to master English to realise corporate expansion plans." and that "English is becoming a core criterion in determining employability" (Nowson 2013).

With the advancement of technology and the accessibility of international communication through various channels of mass and social media, the young generation in countries beyond the boundaries of the UK, the USA and Australia are

exposed to English from an early childhood to such an extent that by the age of 13 or 14 years some students possess extremely good command of spoken English, they are very good readers and listeners, but when it comes to writing a short composition, the picture becomes rather tainted.

As for the process of developing language skills (even when it comes to a child mastering their mother tongue) the first competences built are the receptive ones with the productive to follow. Moreover, the first pieces of language that toddlers produce are just imitation of adults (Harley 2001).

With English being all around us, it is thought-provoking to examine the development of students' English language skills with respect to where and how the actual learning happens – in school, at home, among friends and peers, and what role self-efficacy and positive psychology play in foreign language acquisition. Also, it is worth exploring the reasons why students desire to learn the language, i.e. what their motivation is – to achieve specific goals related to education, travel, or integration in a group.

Of course, students' motivation to learn is the main driving force behind their achievements. Motivation through positive emotions sets attitudes that make students aspire to achieve more. In this way, students deem learning not a burden but a rather enjoyable task to engage with. They come to the classroom expecting meaningful and interesting productive session and feel fulfilled at the end of the lesson even though they may not fully understand the process they have just gone through (Gardner 2010).

There is not much research conducted comparing the motivation and self-efficacy of students and the actual level of their competences. In 2020, Chuang Wang and Ting Sun (Wang, Sun 2020) measured how writing self-efficacy strategies are related to the actual language achievements of 319 Chinese high school students. In 2022 Julia Goetze and Meagan Driver also investigated the relationship between learner's self-efficacy and academic achievement in the context of a second language learning. They describe a measure of L2 self-efficacy and L2 achievement and try to explain statistically the relationship between them.

The current study differs from the latter two as it examines the learners' self-efficacy strategies in the two productive skills in the context of EFL and tries to explain the faster progress of these learners compared to their peers, where the learning is happening and what is their driver to achieve – instrumental or integrative motivation.

Literature Review

In the context of foreign language learning, Gardner describes two types of motivation in terms of learning a second language – 1. integrative: the desire to blend into the group, to communicate and experience the new culture; 2. instrumental: the urge to learn the new language in order to achieve immediate goals like to improve language skills, to progress one's career, to enlarge one's social contact group (Gardner 2010).

There are many scholars that have investigated the relationship between positive psychology, self-awareness, and academic achievements. In their research Reinhard Perkon, Thomas Goetz and Wolfram Titz (2002) investigate how academic emotions such as enjoyment, hope, pride, relief, anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness and boredom affect motivation to learn and achieve. This was followed by a number of meta-analyses (e.g., Lei & Cui, 2016; Marques et al., 2017; Möller et al., 2009; Möller et al., 2020; Petscher, 2010) which point to a sound positive connection between self-perception and academic achievements in various subjects for both undergraduate and graduate students.

This issue was transferred to the field of foreign language teaching and second language acquisition which included not only English as a second and foreign language.

In their study Peter MacIntyre and Tammy Gregersen (2012) recognised the important role of positive psychology on FL learning experience. They argue that it boosts FL learners' motivation, perseverance, and resilience and is the reason for meaningful communication and interaction between learners and teachers.

The issue of the effects of positive psychology and motivation and namely the role of students' motivational self-system on their learning outcomes was explored by Al-Hoorie (2018). In his research he proved that there are three components of the FL learner's motivational self-system that predicted the latter will invest significant efforts in their language acquisition, though the correlation between motivation and the FL achievements were weaker (Al-Hoorie 2018).

Ting Sun and Chuang Wang (Wang, Sun 2020) examine the relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing self-regulated learning strategies and the actual writing proficiency among 319 Chinese high school students. Their analysis found which components contributed significantly to the students' level of competence and provided useful insights how to incorporate the findings in the FL classroom.

The Concept of Self-efficacy

The term is widely used not just in the field of education. It is introduced by Albert Bandura to describe behavioural change where expectations of self-efficacy are "derived from four principal sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states" (Bandura 1977). The accomplishments relate to the actual performance of a behaviour, while the experiences encompass visualising other people performing the same behaviour. The physiological states or feedback relate to pain or fatigue during the performance of the behaviour.

He goes further to describe self-efficacy as "people's judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura 1986: 391). This refers mainly to the individuals' self-perception and self-evaluation whether they possess the needed skills to execute a given task.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the motivation and self-learning strategies of students to study English as a foreign language (EFL), trace the similarities and differences in their attitudes towards learning foreign languages and to answer the following questions:

1. At what age are students first exposed to English, and in what contexts do they acquire and use the language?

2. What is their self-perceived proficiency and motivation to learn languages?

The students were asked to fill in questionnaires on their onset of being exposed to English, their current daily usage of it, as well as what their favourite skill to use is and motivation to learn a new (third) language. Later an interview was conducted to show their confidence in different communicative situations when they have to use English what they feel they need to learn more.

The current study is split in two parts – part one is focused on the motivation of the students to learn English as a foreign language and investigates how and where it happens. The second part is focused on measuring the academic achievements of the students in terms of the two productive skills as they are more difficult to master, and their skilful usage is governed by many rules.

Description of the sample

The students that took part in the research were from the Vocational High School of Mechanics and Electrotechnics in Lovech, Bulgaria. They were selected according to the following criteria:

- accordance with Regulation 11 (2016) of the National Ministry of Education and Culture.

- activities during lessons.

All of the selected students explicitly expressed their desire to take part in extracurricular activities in English, not just for the purposes of the study, but also in the future. There is one student from 8th grade, 8 students from 9th grade and 7 students from 10th grade who took part in the municipal round of the English Language Olympia. Out of them 5 from 9th grade and 5 from 10th grade scored 75 points and above and went through to the next round.

The students are selected from different years of study so that the progress of the tested skills throughout secondary education is easier to be traced. Thus, there are 11 students from 8th grade, 11 students from 9th grade and 8 students from 10th grade. Students from 11th grade and 12th grade were not included in the study as according to the Bulgarian Legislation in Vocational Schools the latter only study Vocational Foreign Language which is related to the chosen profession.

Out of all the participants there are only two females, the reason being that the school is with predominantly male students.

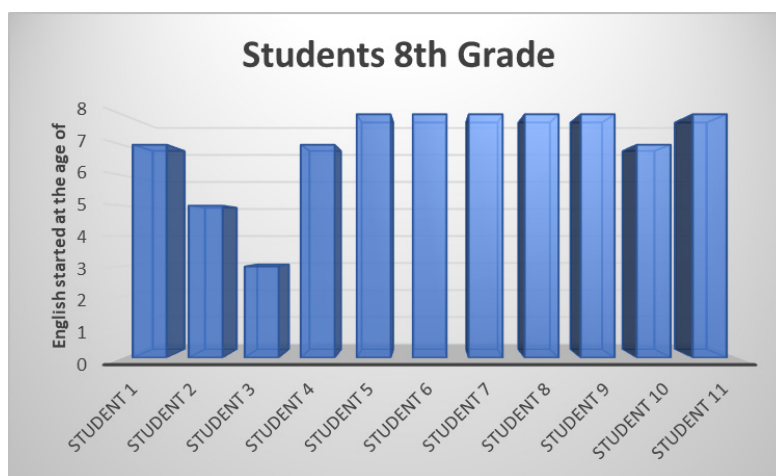
Procedures

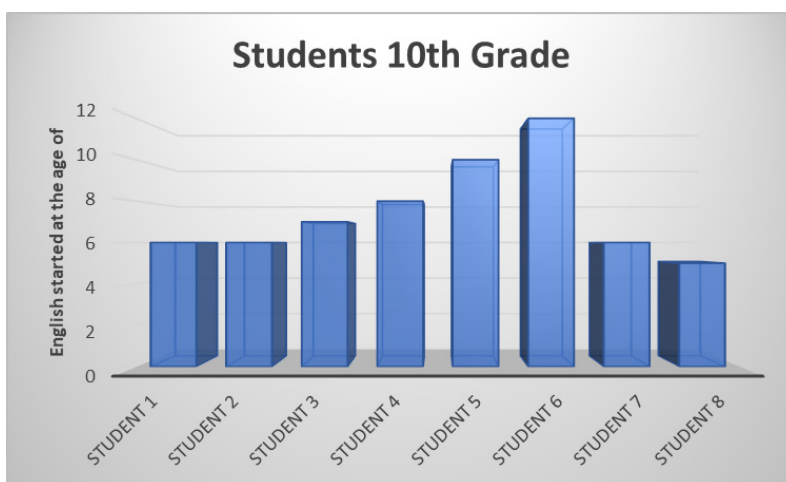
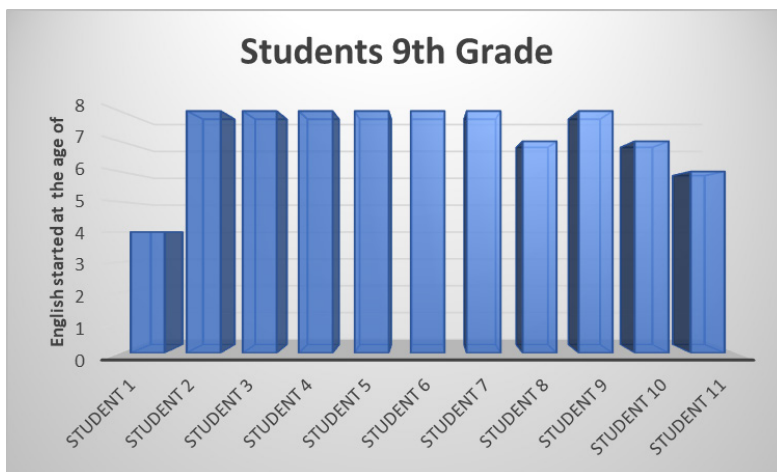
The students were asked to complete a questionnaire where they had to self-rate their language skills, indicate their favourite skill, the age when they first encountered the English language and how (TV, books, the Internet, etc.), and how many hours they spend a day using English (including lessons in school). Afterwards, an interview was conducted with some of them where they had to further elaborate on which skill they find more difficult to master – speaking or writing, what they feel they need to learn better, how successful they think they will be if they had to talk to somebody or write a letter to somebody.

Results and discussion

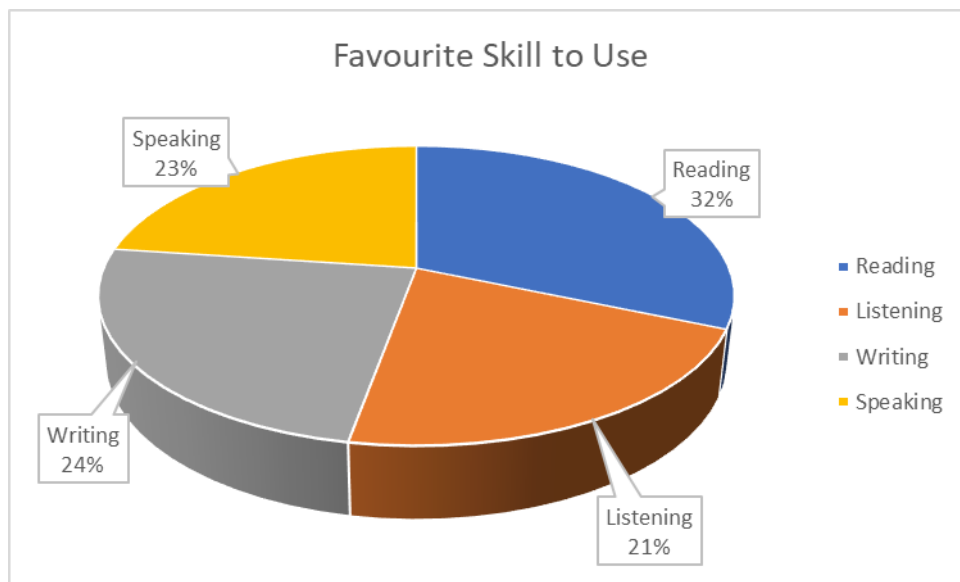
The findings of the questionnaire will be discussed in this section, starting with presentation of results revealing the age at which the students were first exposed to English.

As the onset of their being exposed to English most students (in all school years – 8th, 9th and 10th) answered 2nd grade in school (age of 8) – there are only six that reported they started earlier (one student in 8th grade, one student in 9th grade and four students in 10th grade). Out of the six, two started with private tutoring at the age of 5, the other could not recall a certain age, but only that they initially were watching cartoon films on TV in English which later continued with video material posted on the Internet.

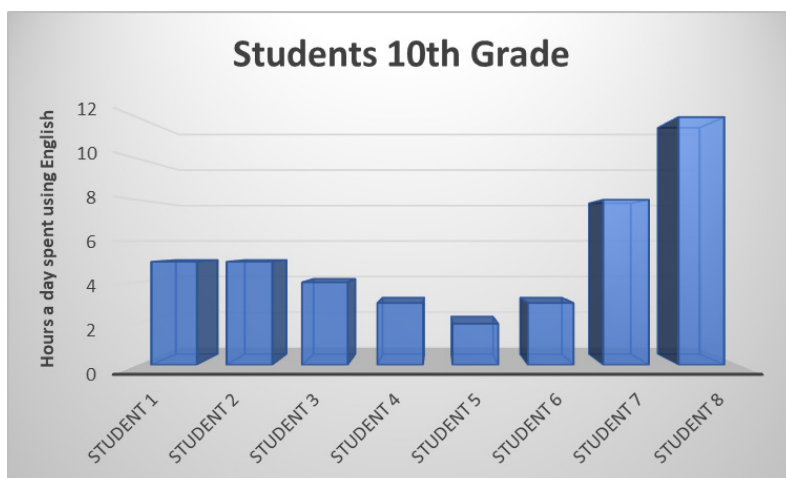
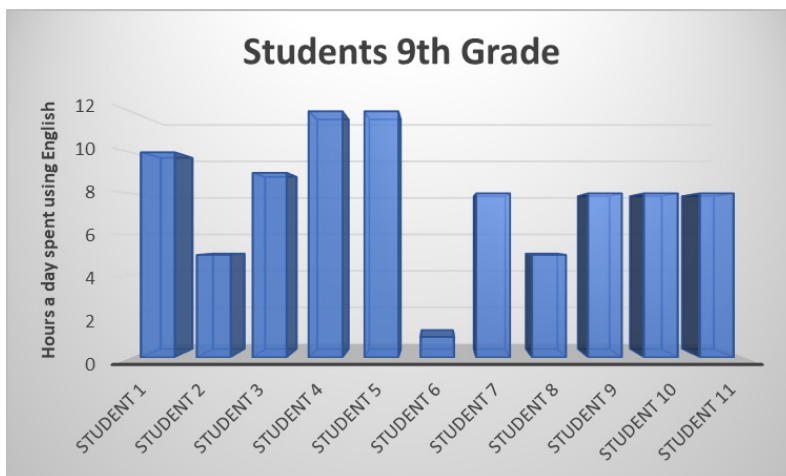
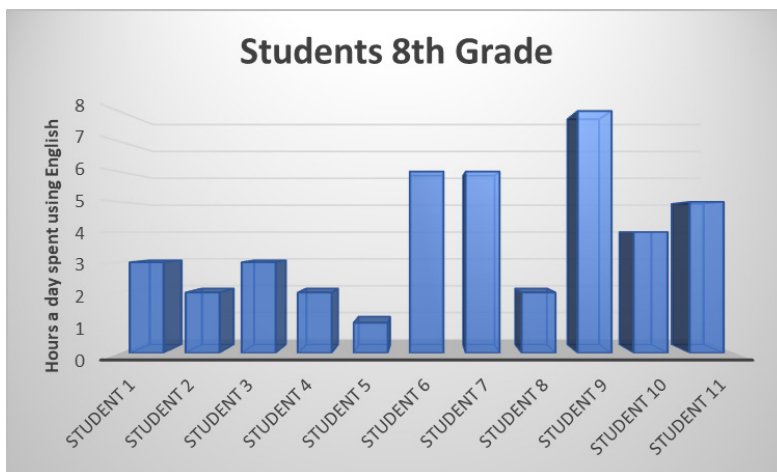




Most students answered that their preferred skill is reading, followed by writing and speaking (see Figure). It should be noted that students were allowed to select multiple answers for this question, and this pattern remained consistent across all grade levels.

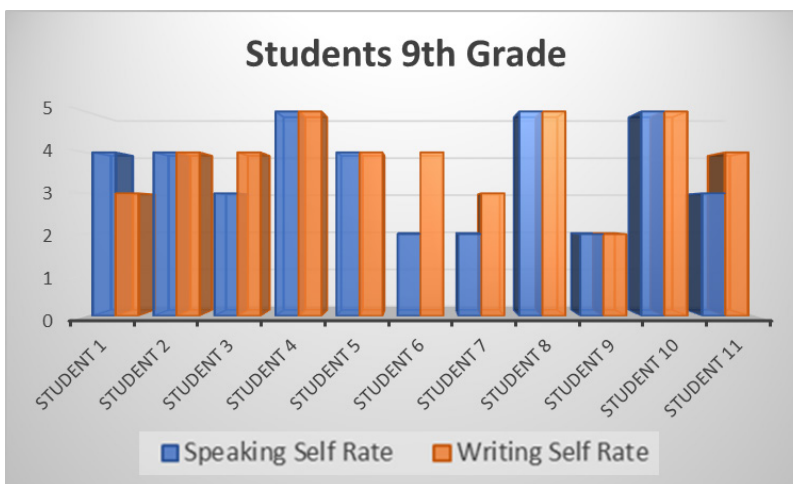
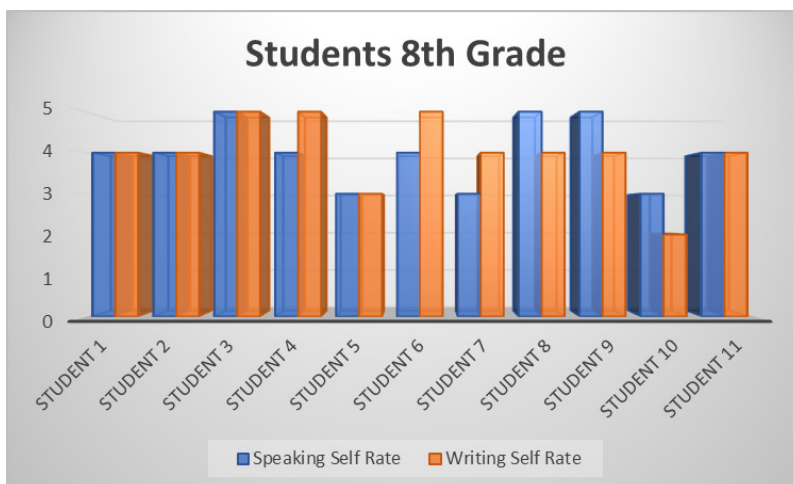


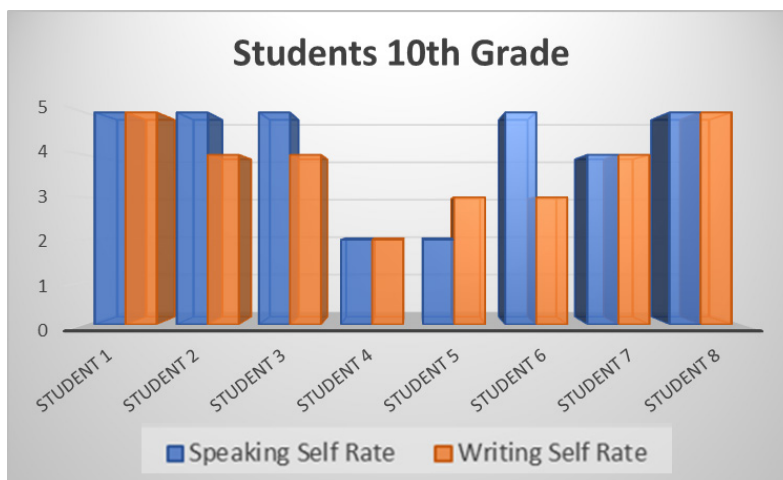
Next, the focus will turn to the number of hours students spend using English each day. Half of the students spend around 6 hours a day using English – most of the time playing online games, searching information, watching videos or socialising. All students point out that they spend time on the same activities and only 2 students from 9th grade said they use English to communicate with friends from abroad. There are few students (3 from 9th and one from 10th grade) that answered that they use English all the time, mainly on their smart phones and computers. This, however, has been included as 12 hours a day for obvious reasons. Quite a few of the students from 8th grade shared that they use English less than those from 9th and 10th grade, but it is suspected that they may not have answered the question honestly for personal reasons most likely related to the way too much gaming and video binge watching is looked upon. The same refers to one student in 9th grade who claimed he uses the language only 1 hour a day and the three in 10th grade whose daily usage is between 2 and 3 hours (see Figure)



In order to find out how students self-evaluated their performance in both oral and written English, they were asked to self-evaluate their performance in oral and written English: 1 – poor, 2 – elementary, 3 – average, 4 – above average, 5 – excellent.

There is no mark 1 in all grades. There are very few students that gave themselves a higher mark in writing than in speaking, but with most the rating is equal in both language skills, which means that they feel equally confident to make use of both (see Figure).





The students were also asked whether they have any motivation and desire to learn a second or even third foreign language. Out of everyone, only three (students from 10th grade) answered “No”, the reason being that it is too much work and English, being spoken everywhere, is enough for them. From the remaining twenty-seven, almost everyone answered they wanted to take up German, with two students expressing interest in learning a third language – Spanish (9th grade) and Japanese (9th grade), correspondingly.

In a separate session students had to share their thoughts and opinions on the following questions:

1. Which is more important for them – to be able to communicate orally or in writing in English?
2. Which skill they find more difficult to acquire – speaking or writing in English?
3. In what situations they feel they will be more successful – when speaking or when writing to someone in English?
4. What else they think they need to learn or do to perfect their English language skills?

To the first question, most students answered that to be able to communicate orally is much more important to them as they deemed that they would have to resort to the skill more often than writing. Only four students from 8th grade thought that not only speaking and writing but all four skills were equally important.

To the second question, everyone found that writing in English is far more difficult than speaking in English. The reasons that the students pointed were – strict rules governing a successful written communication and lack of body language.

To the third question, the students again gave a unanimous answer stating that they felt more comfortable in a situation where they had to speak, and they felt they would convey the message better compared to a situation where they had to write something.

With regards to the fourth question the students from 8th grade felt they needed to learn more vocabulary and grammar (with only few mentioning also practising writing), while the older students acknowledged they lacked practice on complex grammatical structures. One student (from 9th grade) shared that he would learn much faster and better if he was immersed in the language in a native speaking country.

Discussion

In this section, the results will be analysed and interpreted in relation to the research questions. Most students started being exposed to English at the age of 8, which in Bulgaria is the official age of the onset of foreign language learning in school according to the National Curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. However, there are seven students who were exposed to English between the age of four and six either through private lessons or through the Internet and TV.

All students appreciate the four language skills equally but reading is their favourite topping at 32%. This could be further explained by what the students use the language for. Most of the time is searching for information, chatting with friends or online games.

The responses revealed that 19 students use English more than five hours a day and the amount of time increases, the older they become. This includes the English lessons in school. But as there is a stigma nowadays towards people (mainly youngers) who overuse the Internet and social media, there is a possibility that the students were not exactly honest about the time they spend online.

As for confidence in their speaking and writing skills only 15 rate themselves equally in both. Out of the remaining, 7 give a higher rating to their speaking skills and 8 – to their writing skills. This shows a rather different picture of than usually expected – the students feel more confident to communicate orally rather than in written form.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents claimed that they would like to learn another foreign language, and namely German, not another language (this is not clear).

Furthermore, in the interview almost all students reported that for them writing in English was more difficult than speaking and they felt they would do much better in a situation where they had to use the language orally. All of them thought that they needed more practice especially when it came to complex grammar or vocabulary, especially when they had to differentiate between verb tenses or words with close meanings.

Conclusion

The findings of the first part of the study suggest that many students in Bulgaria may begin their exposure to English at a relatively young age (around 7 or 8), and at the beginning it is limited (in most cases) to work done in school. By the time they reach secondary education (age 14 and above), the daily usage for many of them

rises to 4 or 5 hours a day. They engage in various language activities through gaming, searching information, or social networking, all of which induce them to use predominantly English. In this way, they are immersed in the language and learning it happens more and more outside school to an extent where they become very confident and fluent speakers. Their actual academic achievements are the subject of the second part of the study. But the main finding that raises interest is that being confident in one foreign language, students express eagerness and determination to master a second one, and it is mostly out of integrative motivation, not to achieve academic goals.

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