Attitudes to learning English versus other foreign languages in four European countries

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The global status of the English language is often regarded as a threat to other foreign languages in the world (Crystal, 2003). There is no conclusive evidence, however, that the perceived global status of English necessarily results in less favourable attitudes to other languages. This paper compares adolescent students’ attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language to learning other foreign languages. The study is based on qualitative responses to a larger survey exploring self perceptions among 4312 learners in Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. The data reveal that although the global status of English is related to students’ attitudes to learning English versus other languages, individual and contextual factors often play a highly important role in shaping students’ attitudes to language learning. Results from previous research (Taylor & Busse, 2015) show that students engage in complex social interactions with their classmates, friends and teachers and that these multiple relational contexts are related to students’ engagement in class and their ultimate achievement. The qualitative data shed light on the significance of the relationship between teacher and students in this respect. Differences between countries further suggest that the larger educational context and the local language teaching policies also influence students’ attitudes. In general, the findings highlight the need for contextualised inductive interpretation that foregrounds students’ individual perspectives and their learning histories, while taking the larger educational context into account. Implications for teaching and learning are discussed.

References

Taylor, F. and Busse, V. (2015) When the learner becomes the context: Strategic identity display in learning English as a foreign language in Europe. In J. King (Ed.) The dynamic interplay between context and the language learner (pp. 66-83).

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