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A comparative examination of South Australian primary students' attitudes towards German LOTE and other learning areas

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Abstract

One key educational consequence of Australia's decision to commit to multiculturalism was the development and implementation of a policy on the teaching of languages other than English (LOTE) in schools. LOTE was to be a learning area in the core curriculum in all Australian government schools. German was one of the original nine specifically targeted LOTE and by 1997 it was the most popular LOTE in South Australian schools.

Research into students' attitudes towards LOTE has attracted minimal attention despite the acknowledged link between attitude and learning outcomes. The literature that does exist contains some positive findings, but the majority are negative or have negative associations. Three recurring categories of negativity

are that LOTE is uninteresting ('boring'), it is not valuable ('irrelevant', 'unimportant'), and it is academically challenging ('too hard').

One purpose of the study reported here was to investigate student attitudes towards German as a LOTE in comparison to attitudes towards the other core learning areas as this is virtually unresearched. A second purpose was to ascertain whether there are any gender differences in attitudes towards German as a LOTE. This is also a dimension that is relatively unrepresented in the literature.

Introduction

In the 1970s the Australian government decided to implement a policy of multiculturalism (Earle & Fopp 1999). This policy recognised and promoted the diverse cultural composition of the Australian population. One concern of this policy – the teaching of languages other than English in schools – was investigated by Lo Bianco (1987). The result of this commissioned investigation was the National Policy on Languages which identified language issues of national importance (Education Department of South Australia 1991; Lo Bianco 1987).

The key recommendation was that the study of languages other than English (LOTE) should be an integral part of the curriculum in all Australian schools during the compulsory years of education. This recommendation was enacted through the development and implementation of a LOTE policy which decreed that all Australian government school students in the compulsory years of schooling should have access to a LOTE by the year 2000 (Clyne, Jenkins, Chen, Tsokalidou & Wallner 1995; Department of Education and Children's Services 1994; Education Department of SA 1991; Lo Bianco 1987).

German was one of the original nine specifically targeted LOTE (National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia 1993). Other language options were available but by 1997 more South Australian students were studying German than any of the other 26 LOTE options (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 1997).

The study of LOTE is recognised as providing students with multiple opportunities to acquire unique knowledge and experiences which are not available through the other core learning areas. More specifically, in keeping with Australia's declared commitment to multiculturalism, Sachs believes that studying LOTE can play a significant role in this since the learning area 'can break down social and ethnic barriers' (1985, p 26), thus providing students with opportunities to increase their cultural awareness and intercultural competence. This is a key component of the educational rationale for LOTE's inclusion as one of the eight compulsory curricular learning areas (Australian Education Council 1994). It was reiterated more recently in documentation on the National Statements and National Plan for Languages Education which, in

considering an inventory of learners' future needs, declared that 'language skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of this world order' (MCEETYA 2005, p 2). However, despite the acknowledged educational importance of LOTE, there appears to be a relative lack of research into its study in schools. The majority of published literature consists of articles advocating its relevance (Howden 1992; Sachs 1985) or case studies in which teachers report their perceptions of their students' attitudes towards LOTE (Carmody 1990; Ranaldo 1991).

Attitudes are important because of their direct relationship with behaviour. An attitude involves both thought and feeling, and all attitudes incorporate three distinct aspects: cognitive (what one thinks), emotional (what one feels), and behavioural (how one acts) (Burns 2000; Wortman & Loftus 1992). These thoughts and feelings determine how people behave towards things they like or dislike (McInerney and McInerney 1998). Valeski and Stipek reinforce the importance of understanding the causes and consequences of students' attitudes as these become the 'glasses through which children interpret subsequent school experiences' (2001, p 1199). This obviously has important consequences for the classroom since 'attitudes clearly affect most aspects of human social behaviour' (Peterson, Beck & Rowell 1992, p 231) including direct learning behaviours and social behaviours that can serve to enhance or disrupt the learning process. Despite the accepted links between attitudes, behaviour and learning outcomes (McInerney & McInerney 1998; Peterson, Beck & Rowell 1992; Wortman & Loftus 1992), this aspect of LOTE research is one that has attracted minimal attention. In the limited literature on students' attitudes towards LOTE learning, only Kung's (1991) research makes direct reference to the relationship. However, more recently, Jung and Boman (2003) addressed the issue directly through a pilot study. They found that the frequency of disruptive behaviour by students in LOTE (German) classrooms was noticeably higher than in lessons in other learning areas. Although the relationship between the two factors was not the prime focus of the study, Jung and Boman (2003) surmised that the higher frequency of disruptive behaviour indicated a negative attitude towards the learning area.

The literature on students' attitudes towards LOTE contains both positive and negative findings (Burgin 1991; Carmody 1990; Holzknecht 1995; Jones 1995; Kingdon 1995; Kung 1991; McMeniman 1988; Ranaldo 1991; Squires 2003). However, the commonality in the research literature is that attitudes towards the study of another language tend to be negative or at least to have negative associations. Even studies that have identified positive attitudes towards LOTE learning have also shown that many students expressed negative comments, especially in terms of the perceived relevance or usefulness of LOTE. Consistent with findings from research into LOTE in general, studies that have focused specifically on students' attitudes towards German (Carmody 1990; Holzknecht 1995; Ranaldo 1991) have reported that strong negative student attitudes are evident even in the more favourable responses.

The impetus for much of the research into student attitudes towards LOTE has originated from concerns about perceived problems associated with the area. High dropout rates in the LOTE learning area prompted McMeniman (1988) to analyse research literature on student attitudes towards LOTE. Referring to Dernorsek's 1973 study, she reported that student responses indicated strong negative attitudes towards second language study. Common descriptors of LOTE were 'boring, irrelevant classes'. Ultimately, this adversely affected continued participation in LOTE study. Squires (2003) noted similarly worded negative responses in Eardley's 1984 study and found that her own research results echoed these.

Her upper primary students' reluctance to speak German and an apparent negative attitude towards the language persuaded Carmody (1990) to conduct an action research project into the learning area. She collected data using a questionnaire and observations recorded as journal notes. Although no descriptive results were included in reports of the research, responses such as 'Not German again!' and 'I give up. It's all too hard' were taken as typifying students' negative attitudes towards German.

Discontinuation of LOTE study, despite apparent success in the learning area, was one focus of Gardner's extensive 1978 and 1985 research into the attitudes of language learners (see McMeniman 1988). Gardner concluded that an adequate level of achievement alone was insufficient for continued interest in studying a second language. As well as having the ability to achieve academic success in the mechanics of LOTE, students also needed 'a set of favourable attitudes towards the second language and culture' (McMeniman 1988, p 18). McMeniman (1988) also noted that Bartley's 1970 longitudinal study had indicated previously that attitude was an integral factor in perseverance with LOTE study.

Jones (1995) also examined perseverance with LOTE study and identified the perceived academic demands of LOTE as being instrumental in determining student attitude towards the learning area. The major finding of the survey was that students were disinclined to persevere with language courses because they were 'too hard'. Jones's commentary was based on an Australian Council of Educational Research investigation into the reasons for student discontinuation of the study of LOTE. The survey of 4800 secondary students found that 67 per cent of them described LOTE learning as 'more difficult' than science and almost 75 per cent believed it to be 'harder' than mathematics.

Although using a much smaller sample (n = 230) drawn from only one secondary school, Burgin's (1991) research into perseverance with LOTE study revealed the conundrum between enjoyment and learning difficulty. The study found that, although a majority (88%) of students showed a positive attitude towards LOTE learning in reporting that they liked the idea of studying another language, 47 per cent said they found language learning to be difficult. This finding is critical insofar as, especially at secondary school level, academic challenge and anticipated 'scores' in learning areas

can be much more influential than enjoyment on student decisions about subject selections and articulation with future pathways.

Another factor that emerges as a recurring influence on attitudes towards LOTE is that of educational value in terms of perceived relevance. Holzknecht (1995) examined 24 Year 6 and 7 students' beliefs about the interest and/or usefulness of studying German. Positive responses were given by 77 per cent of students, with reasons varying from the possibility of travel to Germany and the ease of communication if the language was known, to the improvement of job prospects, to the intrinsic value of discovering more about 'other peoples' culture'. The main reasons given for the 23 per cent negative responses included German being 'boring', being of no perceived relevance, or of being too academically challenging.

Holzknecht (1995) pursued the matter of interest/usefulness by asking students to evaluate German in comparison to maths and English. Responses rating German favourably were given by 54.5 per cent of the students while 45.5 per cent answered negatively. Positive responses to this comparative question included a belief that learning German might assist in employment, and a perception that knowing more about the culture associated with the language was intrinsically valuable. Negative responses included a belief that maths had much more everyday purpose and relevance than German, and that facility in the language was not relevant to employment or, surprisingly, to further education.

There are problems with generalising from this study as it was conducted in one school only and with a small sample. At face value, the marginally positive response level to the comparative question could be regarded as encouraging given the strong public and policy emphasis on the literacy and numeracy areas to which it was compared. However, the relatively high percentage of negative comments about studying German becomes more significant when taking into account the fact that the school was situated in a community with a strong German identity and affiliation.

Squires' (2003) recent research into primary students' perceptions of LOTE learning revealed a complexity beyond direct student attitudes based on their own evaluations of LOTE's academic challenge or interest. Her study of 95 South Australian primary school students found that, while the students' perceptions were generally favourable in terms of the actual enjoyment of LOTE learning and of their views of LOTE teachers as positive models, the majority of them did not believe LOTE learning to be important nor did they intend pursuing future study in the area. In keeping with the findings of Holzknecht (1995), the determining factor appeared to be the perceived limited relevance of LOTE. However, Squires' (2003) further exploration of this factor revealed strong evidence that this evaluation of the learning area's value stemmed from the influence of parental negativity or indifference towards LOTE on grounds of their perception of it as irrelevant.

In contrast to concern-based research initiatives, some other research findings have revealed positive student attitudes towards LOTE learning. Ranaldo (1991) used a questionnaire, interviews and observation to confirm perceptions of her class's positive attitude towards German. As part of this project students answered the direct question 'Do you like German?' The responses indicated that none of the students entirely disliked German classes, four indicated that they liked them 'sometimes' and one indicated a general liking. The sample size (n = 5) taken from one class in one school makes any generalisation from the study impossible other than to note that positive attitudes towards LOTE are a possibility. It would be useful to examine further why these particular students held positive attitudes.

In summary, three recurring themes or categories of negativity are predominant in the research findings about student attitudes towards LOTE learning: it is uninteresting ('boring'), it is not valuable ('irrelevant', 'unimportant'), and it is academically challenging ('too hard').

However, the studies that led to these findings were concerned mainly with student attitudes towards LOTE learning in a non-comparative context. Consequently, the usefulness of these studies is limited by the lack of data enabling comparisons to be made with student attitudes towards other learning areas. It might well be that the reported attitudes towards LOTE were equally representative of the students' attitudes towards the other core learning areas. Research comparing attitudes towards LOTE in general with attitudes towards other learning areas is limited. Similarly, the majority of research specifically examining students' attitudes towards German as a LOTE has not included any significant probing of comparative attitudes towards the other learning areas. One purpose of the study reported here was to investigate student attitudes towards German as a LOTE in comparison to attitudes towards the other core learning areas.

A second purpose of this research project was to ascertain whether any gender differences existed in attitudes towards German as a LOTE. This is a dimension that is either absent from or given only passing attention in the literature. Holzknecht's (1995) research, although using a very restricted sample, found a very clear contrast in gender attitudes. Positive responses were given by 100 per cent of girls but by only 54 per cent of boys. Burgin's (1991) work also revealed a gender difference, with more girls than boys enjoying LOTE learning and fewer of them finding it to be difficult. However, beyond these almost incidental comments, little attention is afforded to gender-based attitudes.

Method

Participants

One of the potential problems common to many studies of student attitudes is the matter of researcher objectivity, particularly when the classroom teacher is the researcher. Even

in accepted research methods such as participant observation, it is acknowledged that the relationship between the researcher and the participants has the potential to influence the responses and the collection and interpretation of data. This study's approach was conscious of the impressionable age of the respondents and their special relationships with their teachers, so, to counter the possibility of researcher influence, this project was conducted by researchers without any significant existing relationships with the respondents.

The respondents were part of a dual-focus purposive sample also used to investigate levels of disruptive behaviours in German classrooms (see Jung & Boman 2003). In order to direct the study, sample conditions were set to ensure that the same teacher taught all participants German and the other learning areas. German was to be taught in a classroom specifically allocated for German classes, while other learning area classes were conducted in the students' regular classroom. These criteria presented a challenge in locating schools suitable for the survey, but they had to be observed in order to meet the research needs of the project's other focus on attitudes and behaviour in German classes.

Three R–7 government primary schools in Adelaide, South Australia were located. School A was situated in an eastern suburb, school B was situated in a south-eastern suburb, and school C was in a north-eastern suburb. School A offered a choice of two languages other than English (one of which was German) and parents could nominate which language they preferred their child to learn, whereas schools B and C nominated German as the sole LOTE.

Eighty-eight consent forms were distributed between the three schools. Fifty-three students returned consent forms and, of those, 49 students (25 male and 24 female) were granted parental permission to participate, while 4 were denied. The 60 per cent return rate produced an agreed participation rate of 55.7 per cent. Table 1 presents the composition of the sample.

Table 1: Composition of sample

	Year 4	**Year 5**	**Year 6**	**Year 7**
School A	12	0	0	0
School B	0	0	6	15
School C	0	12	4	0
Total	12	12	10	15

Instrumentation

A one-page questionnaire was devised to ascertain students' attitudes towards the eight core learning areas. Students were asked to rate each learning area on a 5-point Likert-type scale graded from '1' = 'don't like' to '5' = 'like'. A section was also provided under each learning area for students' open comments.

A questionnaire was chosen to collect this data as it is one of the most appropriate methods of gaining specific information (Bell 1993). Scales and comments sections were incorporated into the questionnaire to increase the accuracy or specificity of results and to compensate for the restrictive nature of this method of data collection. The Likert-type scale was chosen as it provided interval data which can be analysed by more powerful statistical tests than can nominal dichotomous (yes/no) items (Diekhoff 1996; Fraenkel & Wallen 1996; Malim & Birch 1997; Mitchell & Jolley 1988). The sections for open comments also provided the opportunity to record enriching qualitative data such as qualification of and elaboration on responses.

Procedures

A list of the state schools offering German as a LOTE was obtained from the South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment. When prospective schools had been identified as meeting the research project criteria (see Participants section), telephone conversations outlining the purpose and conditions of the study were conducted. Subsequently, researchers met with the principals and/or teachers.

Once school participation had been secured, information sheets and consent forms were distributed to parents/guardians via student diaries. Students who had been given parental consent and who were present on the survey day completed the attitudinal questionnaire. The researchers ensured students knew what the eight learning areas were by giving examples of possible lesson content. Participants were also given examples of what the intervals of the scale could mean and the purpose of the spaces left for open comments was explained. Participants were encouraged to ask questions for clarification. The questionnaire required approximately ten minutes completion time.

Results

A 5-point Likert scale was used where '1' represented 'don't like' and '5' represented 'like'. Table 2 presents the frequencies of students' ratings of LOTE German and the other seven learning areas. The data indicate that 52 per cent of all students rated German poorly (ratings 1 and 2) and that 29 per cent rated it highly (ratings 4 and 5), resulting in it being the lowest-rated learning area. This rating is markedly more negative than the frequency of the second lowest-rated learning area, English, which 20 per cent of students rated poorly and 42 per cent rated highly. Health and physical education was rated most favourably with 75 per cent of students rating it highly while 15 per cent rated it poorly.

Table 2: Frequencies of students' ratings of German and the seven other learning areas

Rating	Area of learning							
	German	**English**	**SaSE**	**Maths**	**Science**	**The arts**	**Technology**	**Health & PE**
1	14	2	3	3	0	4	1	2
2	11	8	6	9	7	5	4	5
3	9	18	13	8	17	3	10	5
4	8	12	18	13	8	13	10	5
5	6	8	8	15	16	23	23	31

Note: a rating of '1' = don't like; '5' = like.

The results from the questionnaire ascertaining the students' attitudes toward studying German and the other seven learning areas are presented as mean student ratings in Table 3. The mean rating of German was the lowest at 2.60, with the second-lowest being English at 3.33, while the mean rating of health and physical education was the highest at 4.21.

Table 3: Mean student ratings for learning areas

	German	**English**	**SaSE**	**Maths**	**Science**	**The arts**	**Techno-logy**	**Health & PE**
Mean	2.60	3.33	3.46	3.58	3.69	3.96	4.04	4.21
Std. deviation	1.40	1.08	1.11	1.29	1.09	1.32	1.11	1.24

Note: a rating of '1' = don't like; '5' = like.

The mean for German was significantly lower than the mean for English *(t* = 3.47, n = 48, *P* = .001) which was the next lowest-ranked learning area. It was also found that the mean for health and physical education was not significantly different

from the arts or technology, the next two highest-ranked learning areas, but was significantly different from science *(t* = 2.876, n = 48, *P* = .006).

Students also gave qualitative data explaining their reasons for each rating. These data varied widely. Fourteen students rated German '1' (don't like) and of these 40 per cent said it was 'boring', 33 per cent said it was 'hard', and 13 per cent said 'I don't want to learn another language'. Singular responses included 'I hate the teacher' and 'It's horrible'.

Eleven students rated German '2' with 33 per cent of these considering it 'boring'. Singular responses included 'Repeats too much', 'I don't like learning a language', 'I don't need a second language', It's too hard', and 'We don't learn much'.

Nine students rated German '3' with 22 per cent of these stating that German was 'too hard'. Other individual responses were, 'It's boring', 'I'm not good at German' and 'We should be concentrating on other subjects'. Some positive statements were also noted, including 'It's interesting', 'I like learning a different language', and 'You learn a lot'. One student did not provide any explanation.

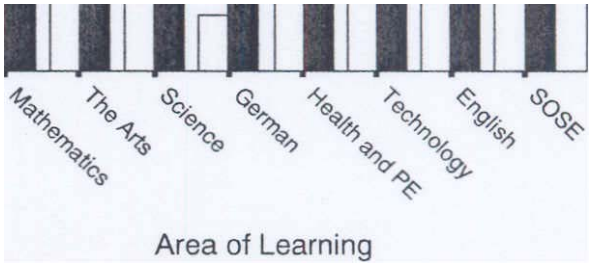
German was rated '4' by 8 students, of whom 32 per cent thought it was 'good to learn a second language', while individual students wrote 'German is fun', 'I like the teacher', 'German is easy', and 'One of my parents is German'. Two students did not provide any explanation.

Only 6 students gave German a rating of '5' (like). Of these, 66 per cent liked 'learning about another country and another language'. One student 'liked the teacher' and another student reported that 'German is good because it's different'.

Overall, the major categories of negative responses towards German were 'boring' (21% of all students); 'too hard' (17%); and dislike of learning a second language or belief that a second language was not necessary (10%). Only 13 per cent of the students believed that learning a second language and culture was valuable.

This study also had a particular interest in gender differences in attitudes towards German and the other learning areas. The results are shown in a bar graph of ratings for the eight learning areas (Figure 1). The graph shows that German was given the lowest rating by both genders while health and physical education and the arts received the highest ratings by both. Although there was no significant gender difference *(F* [1 ,46] = 0.063, n = 48, *P* = .803), males' attitudes to maths, science, health and physical education, and technology were more positive than were females'. In contrast, females' attitudes were more positive than males' towards the arts, society and environment and German.

Figure 1: Ratings of areas of learning by gender



Discussion

The overall purpose of this study was to compare attitudes towards German with attitudes towards the other the core curricular learning areas. This comparative approach represents a new direction in this area. Previous research has usually been based on discrete positive–negative rating of LOTE or of a specific LOTE language.

However, the overall findings of this project do not represent any new direction in the general status of German as a LOTE. The results concur with the more negative research literature findings in that most of the students who completed the questionnaire rated German negatively and supported this rating with negative comments.

In this study, it was expected that the responses to direct questions would provide the key data for comparative ratings. The results indicate unequivocally that the students' attitudes towards German as a LOTE are markedly more negative than their attitudes towards each of the other learning areas. The students' mean rating of German was the lowest of all eight learning areas and was significantly lower than the ratings for the second lowest-rated learning area, English. It is worth noting that the two lowest-rating learning areas are languages.

The research literature's main explanations of negative attitudes towards LOTE in general (Jones 1995; McMeniman 1988) are also apparent in those for German as a specific LOTE (Carmody 1990; Holzknecht 1995; Jung & Boman 2003). These explanations can be categorised as curricular (interest in and engagement with learning), academic challenge (degree of learning difficulty), and value (perceived relevance). In this study, it was expected that the responses to direct questions would provide some data on attitudes, but it was also anticipated that qualitative data retrieved from open comments would provide valuable explanatory insights. This eventuated in the qualitative data's elaboration on the negative attitudes towards German. All three of the research literature's major categories of negative explanations were represented in responses such as 'It's boring', 'It repeats too much' (curricular); 'It's too hard'

(academic challenge); and 'I don't want to learn another language', 'We don't learn much' and 'We should be concentrating on other subjects' (value).

The research literature findings on positive attitudes towards LOTE in general are also reflected in studies of attitudes towards specific LOTE (Burgin 1991; Squires 2003). These fall mainly into the categories of curricular (interest in and engagement with learning) and value (perceived relevance), although some more subjective factors such as the teacher–student relationship also appear. The positive findings in this study are very limited but are mainly in the area of liking learning about another country's language and culture (the curricular category).

The study also had an interest in any differentiation in gender responses. Research literature with a focus on this is scant but indicates that more females than males find enjoyment, interest and relevance in second language learning, with fewer females than males finding learning in the area to be difficult (Burgin 1991; Holzknecht 1995). The findings of this study concur with those reported in the limited literature, but also suggest that, while some differences in attitudes between the genders exist, these are not statistically significant.

This study also found that, while both genders agree in rating German as the least-liked learning area, the male mean rating is lower than that of the females. However, a more significant difference was found between males' and females' attitudes towards German when compared with their attitudes towards the other learning areas.

Although the qualitative data collected in this study cannot be compared with the findings of many earlier studies which did not differentiate the explanations of male and female students, this finding has extended research knowledge of this particular area, confirming 'received wisdom' about gender attitudes towards LOTE learning. In fact, the general learning area orientations evident in the findings of this study reflect the stereotypical gender associations, with males being most positive towards maths, science, health and physical education, and technology, while females were more positive towards the arts, society and environment, and German. Gender difference in attitudes towards LOTE learning would be a useful focus for future research, especially given the resurgence of the debate on boys' and girls' schooling needs.

While this study presents results that raise pertinent issues for discussion and further research, it is acknowledged that it was restricted by particular conditions. The dual-focus, purposive nature of the sample limits the extent to which generalisations can be drawn from the results. Another limitation is the small sample size. A further factor is the age of the subjects, as the year level of the students was a variable that the researchers could not hold constant across the three schools involved in the study.

However, there were a number of findings from this study that may have practical implications for teachers of German and, possibly, LOTE teachers in general. Teachers

can be alerted to the need to address the study's findings of notable negative student attitudes towards German. The fact that students generally described German as boring and difficult (see Jung & Boman 2003) suggests that a reassessment of LOTE teaching content and methodology may be beneficial. The prospect of more positive student attitudes should provide realistic expectations of more conducive behaviour and enhanced learning outcomes, creating a spiral of improvement for students and teachers alike.

One of the recurring themes in the literature that resonated in the findings of this study was that of the perceived usefulness or relevance of LOTE in general or of German as a specific LOTE. Contemporary attitudes towards education are increasingly instrumental, valuing learning for its functionality and immediacy rather than as an accumulative process or an end in itself. A perceived limited applicability or 'relevance' in a learning area is more likely to elicit negative responses from students and parents (Squires 2003). The challenge that this presents to LOTE advocates is recognised as 'an ongoing need to convey to the broader community the real and achievable benefits of effective languages education for all learners' (MCEETYA 2005, p 5). This challenge presents a critical research focus in the LOTE area.

Other possible directions for future research beyond the immediate area of student attitudes towards German can also be derived from the results of this study. Research into the opinions of the wider school community may be necessary. Investigation of the attitudes of parents, mainstream classroom teachers and school administrators may help to determine if a more general negative attitude exists towards the study of German. This would provide school curriculum developers with a better understanding of the perceptions of the wider school community so that appropriate action can be considered. It might also be beneficial to explore whether the findings of this study are peculiar to German LOTE classes or whether, as the evidence seems to suggest, negative attitudes exist towards LOTE in general. Indeed, the fact that German and English received the lowest and second-lowest ratings might suggest that the content and methodology of language learning in general warrants further research attention.

Three major differences are evident between this study and previous studies. The latter did not compare attitudes towards LOTE with attitudes towards other core learning areas, did not compare gender variations, and were at greater risk of teacher influence on the research process. This study compared gender attitudes towards German with attitudes towards the other core learning areas and used researchers who were not the students' usual teacher in an attempt to mitigate subjective influence. The findings of this study have added to the hitherto limited research into students' attitudes towards German both in its own right as a LOTE and in comparison to other core learning areas. They also illustrate the need for more concentrated and more widespread research into associated aspects of the area.

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