

Chapter 6

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Jožica Nuč and Karmen Pižorn

THE STRUCTURE OF THE INSTRUMENT AND THE RATIONALE

In this chapter we will discuss the data concerning the students obtained from the post-lesson group interview with students.

The Post-Lesson Group Interview with the Students

The post-lesson group interview with the students was performed immediately after the lesson by the observer who interviewed three students chosen by the observing teacher. The interview, in Slovenian, was structured and consisted of 15 questions. The students were asked about the frequency of having the language assistant in the class and the differences between the lessons with their teacher and those with their language assistant. They were also questioned as to which skills were practised by language assistants, what kind of materials language assistants used and whether the students could choose the topic. Finally, we¹ wanted to know which extra-curricular activities the students were involved in and their perception of the language assistants' involvement in them (see *Appendix 3*).

THE NATURE OF THE SAMPLE

34 lessons were observed and 34 post-lesson group interviews with students were conducted and analysed.

EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS

Background Information about Classes of Students

Years of learning the foreign language and the years of learning the foreign language with a language assistant

As the results in *Table 6.1* show 80% of students interviewed had been learning the foreign language for more than two years, which was not surprising as the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport's policy had been to place most language assistants in classes with more than a year of learning a foreign language.

¹ From now in this chapter 'we' refers to the Baseline Study Team.

Table 6.1 The number of years of learning the foreign language

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>1 year</i>	2	5.9
<i>2 years</i>	5	14.8
<i>3 years</i>	5	14.8
<i>4 years</i>	3	8.8
<i>5 years</i>	-	-
<i>6 years</i>	6	17.6
<i>7 years</i>	6	17.6
<i>8 years</i>	6	17.6
<i>9 years</i>	1	2.9
<i>Total</i>	34	100

As the data in *Table 6.2* shows the average number of years a class had had a language assistant was between one and two years.

Table 6.2 The amount of time learning the foreign language with a language assistant

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>2 months</i>	1	2.9
<i>3 months</i>	1	2.9
<i>8 months</i>	2	5.9
<i>1 year</i>	13	38.3
<i>2 years</i>	11	32.3
<i>3 years</i>	4	11.8
<i>4 years</i>	2	5.9
<i>Total</i>	34	100

Registered and present students

We believed there would be some absenteeism in the observed lessons, which proved to be the case. The numbers in *Table 6.3* show that the rate of absences was higher in secondary schools (from two to five students) than in primary schools. However, we do not know the

reason for these absences.

Table 6.3 The average number of students present compared to the number enrolled

	<i>Students present No.</i>	<i>Enrolled students No.</i>
<i>Primary</i>	16	17
<i>Vocational</i>	20	22
<i>Grammar</i>	24	29
<i>Mixed (Vocational and Grammar)</i>	18	23

First, second or third foreign language

The foreign language taught in the observed lessons was predominantly the students' first foreign language. Out of 34 classes observed, 25 were in the first foreign language.

Frequency of having a language assistant in the classroom

We did not assume that there would be any big differences in the frequency of having language assistants in the classroom according to the foreign language taught. However, the results showed that the Italian, German and French classes had a higher percentage of language assistants than the English ones as seen in *Table 6.4*.

Table 6.4 Frequency of having a language assistant in the classroom

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>English No.</i>	<i>French No.</i>	<i>German No.</i>	<i>Italian No.</i>
<i>Every lesson</i>	-	-	1	2
<i>Once a week</i>	16	4	2	-
<i>Two/Three times a month</i>	5	-	1	-
<i>Once a month</i>	3	-	-	-
<i>Total</i>	24	4	4	2

This was due to the fact that the less widely taught languages, Italian, German and French were mostly taught as a second or third foreign language and the number of these students was lower than that of those learning a first foreign language. This gave these language classes more opportunity to include language assistants more frequently in the classroom.

The first foreign language taught in Slovenia was predominantly English, so the number of these students and the number of classes was much higher than of any other foreign language. For example, the assistant was supposed to teach a maximum of 20 hours a week and in some schools there was the possibility that there would be more than 20 classes

learning English. As seen in *Table 6.4* a third of students learning English saw their language assistant less than once a week as opposed to other foreign languages where the frequency was much higher, only one out of ten assistants saw the class less than once a week.

We wanted to ascertain whether the frequency of having language assistants in the class influenced the students' performance in the four language skills. Therefore we selected a number of students who perceived that their performance in all skills was outstanding and compared them with the data of all students. There were four classes of them. The results show that 75% of the four classes of students saw the language assistant at least once a week.

As can be seen in *Table 6.5*, the vast majority of students (eight out of nine groups of students) who saw the language assistant less than once a week expressed dissatisfaction with this situation. Even half of those who saw the language assistant once a week, claimed that that was not enough. Those who saw the language assistant every lesson were satisfied with this fact.

Table 6.5 Whether the students think they see the language assistant often enough

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Every lesson</i>	3	8.8	-	-
<i>Once a week</i>	11	32.4	11	32.4
<i>Two/three times a month</i>	1	2.9	5	14.7
<i>Once a month</i>	-	-	3	8.8
<i>Total</i>	15	44	19	56

However, when the students were questioned whether they would like to see the assistant more often, there was a noticeable discrepancy, between students claiming to have had enough hours with the assistant (44%) and later stating they wished to have more (80%).

As expected, students who wished to see the language assistant more often gave the following reasons:

- the lessons with language assistants were perceived to be more enjoyable
- students thought there were more opportunities for using real language.

Those students who did not wish to have more lessons with the language assistant stated that they also needed their own teacher to practice grammar.

The Students' Perception of Classroom Activity

Type of teaching

We were interested in discovering how the teacher and the language assistant divided the

work in the classroom. As seen in *Table 6.6*, a number of students stated that teachers did more reactive work such as translations or explanations. Language assistants were more involved in real teaching.

Table 6.6 Division of work between the assistant and the teacher as perceived by the students

	No.
<i>Teacher translates, explains when the students do not understand</i>	9
<i>Teacher just listens, assistant teaches</i>	6
<i>Team teaching</i>	4
<i>Assistant vocabulary, teacher grammar</i>	4
<i>Teacher at the beginning and the end of the lesson, the assistant the rest</i>	3
<i>Teaching in split classes, group teaching</i>	3
<i>No answer</i>	3
<i>Teacher and assistant are not in the classes together</i>	2

We believed that in most cases, both the language assistant and the teacher would be present in the class. The results from the interview showed that 91% of students claimed they had been alone with the language assistant in the classroom at least once. However, there was a reasonably high percentage (32%) of students who stated that they were almost always alone with the language assistant as seen in *Table 6.7*. This was also confirmed by the language assistants, who claimed in their interviews that solo teaching was the commonest mode of organisation of classes.

Table 6.7 How often are the students alone with the language assistant in the classroom?

	No.	%
<i>Rarely</i>	13	38.2
<i>Sometimes</i>	3	8.8
<i>Frequently</i>	8	23.6
<i>Always</i>	3	8.8
<i>When the teacher was away</i>	2	5.9
<i>No answer</i>	5	14.7
<i>Total</i>	34	100

We wanted to discover whether the presence of both the language assistant and the teacher influenced the students’ performance in the four language skills. Therefore we selected a number of students who perceived that their performance in all skills was outstanding and compared them with the data of all students. There were four classes of them. The results show that all four classes always had both the language assistant and the teacher together in the classroom.

We were interested in the students’ opinions about the lessons with the language assistant. As seen from *Table 6.8*, 47% of students found the classes with the language assistant more enjoyable or more interactive, while 24% of students did not see any difference between the lessons with the language assistant and those of their teachers.

From students' answers it seemed that the language assistants’ ability to manage the class was better than we expected.

Table 6.8 What is the lesson like if the language assistant is teaching alone?

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>More enjoyable</i>	8	23.5
<i>More interaction</i>	7	20.6
<i>Better than with the teacher</i>	1	2.9
<i>The same as with the teacher</i>	8	23.5
<i>Each time a new unit</i>	1	2.9
<i>Split groups</i>	2	5.9
<i>More noisy</i>	3	8.9
<i>No answer</i>	4	11.8
<i>Total</i>	34	100

We wanted to find out what the students’ attitude was to having both the language assistant and the teacher in the class. As seen in *Table 6.9*, 50% of students claimed they liked working with both the language assistant and the teacher at the same time, while only 20% said that they did not like it.

Table 6.9 Whether the students like having two teachers in the classroom at the same time

	No.	%
<i>Yes</i>	14	41.2
<i>Usually</i>	3	8.8
<i>Sometimes</i>	3	8.8
<i>No</i>	7	20.6
<i>Don't care</i>	2	5.9
<i>Don't have them together in the classroom</i>	1	2.9
<i>No answer</i>	4	11.8
<i>Total</i>	34	100

Skills

We expected that speaking and listening skills would be practised more than other skills because speaking was felt to be the language assistants' strongest point and most interesting and beneficial for the students. We did not expect the language assistants to practise listening comprehension as a specific skill because listening to recorded material can easily be performed by a non-native speaker.

Speaking as a skill was what the teachers expected the language assistants to practise most with the students, which was actually the case. Also speaking is a natural part of almost all activities and therefore included in any lesson. Table 6.10 shows the frequency, as perceived by the students, of the skills practised in classes with the language assistant. It can be seen that the highest percentage refers to speaking, with 85% saying that speaking was always practised. The skill least practised was writing, with 41% saying that they never practised this skill.

Table 6.10 Frequency of practising the four skills with the language assistant

	<i>Listening</i>		<i>Writing</i>		<i>Speaking</i>		<i>Reading</i>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Always</i>	8	23.6	3	8.8	29	85.4	12	35.3
<i>Mostly</i>	10	29.4	8	23.5	3	8.8	9	26.5
<i>Sometimes</i>	6	17.6	9	26.5	1	2.9	7	20.6
<i>Never</i>	10	29.4	14	41.2	1	2.9	6	17.6
<i>Total</i>	34	100	34	100	34	100	34	100

Areas of students' improvement

We wanted to exploit the areas language assistants proved most useful in. As expected, students perceived that they had improved mostly in speaking and vocabulary followed by pronunciation, which can be seen in *Table 6.11*.

Table 6.11 The students' perception of areas and amount of improvement

	<i>Very Much</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Little</i>
	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Cultural awareness</i>	14	14	6
<i>Self-confidence</i>	11	21	4
<i>Fluency</i>	16	16	2
<i>Reading</i>	7	15	12
<i>Writing</i>	4	15	15
<i>Listening</i>	15	13	6
<i>Speaking</i>	24	10	-
<i>Vocabulary</i>	24	9	1
<i>Pronunciation</i>	19	13	2

We selected a number of students (four classes of students), who thought that they had improved best at all skills and compared them with the data for all students. We expected to get similar results to all student groups and the results in *Tables 6.11* and *6.12* show that this was actually the case. The most improved skills in this selected group were listening, speaking and vocabulary, where all four classes of students thought that they had improved most.

Table 6.12 Perceived areas of improvement by a selected sample of students (4 classes)

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Listening</i>	4
<i>Speaking</i>	4
<i>Vocabulary</i>	4
<i>Reading</i>	3

Table continued overleaf.

<i>Fluency</i>	3
<i>Writing</i>	3
<i>Pronunciation</i>	3

Materials

We wanted to determine what kind of materials language assistants used and whether these were appreciated by the students.

The students stated that handouts were the most commonly used materials with language assistants, followed by newspapers and textbooks, as seen in *Table 6.13*. Students claimed that they also used the textbooks with language assistants, which was surprising as it had been recommended at the induction courses that language assistants should retreat to the textbooks as guidelines to topics and other areas, but were by no means meant as the only resource material.

Table 6.13 Materials used or not used by language assistants

	<i>Used</i>	<i>Not used</i>
	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Handouts</i>	29	2
<i>Newspapers</i>	17	17
<i>Textbook</i>	16	18
<i>Audiocassettes</i>	11	14
<i>Video</i>	11	23
<i>Internet</i>	5	29

As expected, most of the students (74%) liked the materials used by language assistants.

Topics

We wanted to find out which topics had been covered by the language assistants. As seen in *Table 6.14*, there was a variety of different topics covered. What came as a surprise was that in quite a high number of classes grammar was covered. We assumed that grammar was still the domain of the teachers while language assistants helped students with extra practice or, if lessons were shared, the teacher was expected to teach grammar and the language assistant prepared exercises.

Table 6.14 Topics covered by language assistants

	No.
<i>Grammar</i>	5
<i>Literature</i>	4
<i>Interculture</i>	3
<i>Food</i>	3
<i>Professional issues</i>	2
<i>Teenagers</i>	2
<i>School</i>	2
<i>Sport</i>	1
<i>Holidays</i>	1
<i>Headlines</i>	1
<i>Cars</i>	1
<i>Graffiti</i>	1
<i>IQ</i>	1
<i>Family planning</i>	1
<i>Homelessness</i>	1
<i>Celebrities</i>	1
<i>Clothes and appearance</i>	1
<i>Picture description</i>	1
<i>At the doctor's</i>	1

We were interested in whether students could choose topics. Contrary to our expectations the results show that only half of the students were given the opportunity to select a topic.

Slovenian culture was a widely discussed topic with language assistants as 88% of students discussed it with the language assistant on a regular basis. It was also apparent that the target culture was discussed (94%) and then compared (79%) with Slovenian culture in the majority of lessons with language assistants.

Since cultural topics are a natural topic of conversation in this context (foreigner in the classroom), it was not surprising that language assistants resorted to what they were most familiar with and tried to find out about what they were not. It was not clear whether the students were presented only with facts and data or whether real cultural awareness was being developed.

Assessment

We assumed that formal assessment would be performed by teachers only, as this was in accordance with the *School Assessment Regulations*. When the teacher and the language

assistant assessed together we presumed that the teacher, being responsible for grading, would consult the language assistant. It would be expected that teachers would include the language assistants' topics in their test-papers to give the language assistants more credibility and in having done so, show that they valued the language assistants' work. *Table 6.15* shows that in most cases it was only the teacher who assessed and not the assistant on his/her own. However, the work covered by the assistant is included in the assessment.

Table 6.15 Assessment of students

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Only teacher assesses</i>	16	47.0
<i>Teacher and assistant assess</i>	6	17.6
<i>Assistant's topics are included in tests</i>	3	8.9
<i>Assistant assesses informally</i>	3	8.9
<i>Students don't know whether assistant assesses them or not</i>	1	2.9
<i>No answer</i>	5	14.7
<i>Total</i>	34	100

Lessons with regular teachers and language assistants compared

We wanted to discover what differences were perceived by students when comparing lessons with their regular teacher and those shared with the language assistant. The lessons were compared according to the following categories: atmosphere, discipline, and interaction.

Atmosphere

We wanted to find out what the students' perception was of the atmosphere in the classroom, when together with the language assistant. 74% of students found these lessons more enjoyable and more interesting than those with their regular teacher, as seen in *Table 6.16*.

Table 6.16 Classroom atmosphere

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Lessons with the assistant are more enjoyable and interesting</i>	19	55.9
<i>Lessons with the assistant are (much) better</i>	6	17.7
<i>The atmosphere depends on the topic</i>	1	2.9
<i>The same as with the teacher</i>	3	8.9

Table continued overleaf.

<i>Lessons with the assistant are less enjoyable</i>	1	2.9
<i>Teacher's lessons are bad</i>	1	2.9
<i>Depends on the individual</i>	2	5.9
<i>No answer</i>	1	2.9
<i>Total</i>	34	100

Discipline

As language assistants reported problems concerning discipline, we also expected that students would feel the same. Contrary to our expectations, students did not perceive discipline to be a problem in the class. As seen in *Table 6.17*, 50% claimed that there were no differences and 15% that the discipline with the language assistant was even better.

Table 6.17 Classroom discipline

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>The same as with the teacher</i>	17	50.0
<i>Discipline is better with the teacher</i>	11	32.4
<i>Discipline is better with the assistant</i>	5	14.7
<i>No answer</i>	1	2.9
<i>Total</i>	34	100

Interaction

We expected that interaction in the classroom would be lively and our expectations were partly met. As seen in *Table 6.18*, 35% of students claimed that interaction when language assistants were present in the classroom was the same as with their teachers and 41% that it was better.

Table 6.18 Classroom interaction

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>The same as with the teacher</i>	12	35.3
<i>Better with the teacher</i>	4	11.8
<i>Better with the assistant</i>	14	41.2
<i>Interaction is at students' choice</i>	1	2.9
<i>Depends on the individual</i>	1	2.9
<i>No answer</i>	2	5.9
<i>Total</i>	34	100

What Students Enjoyed Most and Least about Language Assistants' Lessons

We wanted to discover what students enjoyed most and least about language assistants' lessons. Students' interest in cultural issues, as seen in *Table 6.19*, confirmed our expectations. However, we were surprised that language assistants seemed not to attract the students' interest in music in spite of the fact that they were usually younger than the teachers and the generation gap was smaller.

Table 6.19 Topics enjoyed by students

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Culture</i>	28
<i>School system</i>	4
<i>Love</i>	2
<i>Humour</i>	2
<i>Media</i>	2
<i>Music</i>	1
<i>None</i>	1

On the other hand, students commented that there was too much language assistant talk and the lessons were difficult to follow, as seen in *Table 6.20*.

Table 6.20 Drawbacks perceived by students

	<i>No.</i>
<i>The lessons are difficult to follow</i>	3
<i>The students do not talk enough</i>	3
<i>Groups are too large</i>	2
<i>No cultural topics are discussed, no media used</i>	2
<i>Less discipline</i>	2
<i>The teacher frequently cancels the lessons with the assistants</i>	1
<i>Too much teacher-talk</i>	1
<i>Too little teacher-talk</i>	1
<i>The students get expelled from the classroom by the assistant</i>	1
<i>The lessons are not well organised</i>	1

Abilities students liked best about language assistants

We were interested to see what students appreciated most when working together with language assistants. They were given four options to choose from and they ordered them in

the following way, starting with the most preferred option:

- assistant’s teaching of conversational skills
- assistant’s explanation of the target culture
- assistant’s clarity
- assistant’s use of visual and audio aids.

They were also given an extra option of *other* under which they listed the following:

- raising self-confidence
- experiences
- self-made teaching material
- new topics and their presentations
- relaxed atmosphere, more motivation
- better pronunciation
- literature and *Matura* preparation.

Other comments

Most other comments with respect to language assistants’ lessons were positive, with the exception of two classes, which claimed that they learnt more with the regular teacher.

The positive comments mentioned by the students:

- we like spending lessons with the assistant
- we are more independent
- topics are more interesting
- intercultural topics are discussed
- role plays are performed
- communication in the foreign language only
- more interaction because of smaller groups.

Language Assistants’ Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities

We wanted to learn which extra-curricular activities were offered by schools in the opinion of the students, which extra-curricular activities they were involved in, and whether students were aware of the language assistants’ participation in these activities. As seen in *Table 6.21* the activities most widespread in schools were: creative arts, followed by sport and language courses.

Table 6.21 Extra-curricular activities offered in schools

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Creative arts</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Sport</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Language courses</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Reading badge</i>	<i>6</i>

Table continued overleaf.

<i>Debate club</i>	8
<i>Natural sciences</i>	7
<i>Charity work</i>	3
<i>Many</i>	2
<i>The students don't know</i>	3

The students claimed that half the language assistants were involved in sports and cultural days as seen in *Table 6.22*. The data appears to show that the schools involved language assistants in their life and language assistants participated.

Table 6.22 The language assistants' involvement in extra-curricular activities

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Sports days</i>	17	15	2
<i>Cultural days</i>	16	17	1
<i>Other (excursions, research work, school competitions)</i>	10	23	1
<i>Drama</i>	9	24	1
<i>Debate club</i>	7	26	1
<i>Newspapers</i>	4	21	-
<i>Reading badge</i>	4	28	2
<i>Parents' meetings</i>	6	2	26

It is encouraging to note that the majority of students interviewed knew whether the assistants were involved in extra-curricula activities. In general most students do not attend parents' meetings and therefore, it is not surprising that they do not know whether the assistants attend them or not.

Socialising With Language Assistants Outside the Classroom

We wanted to find out whether students socialised with language assistants outside the classroom and on what occasions. In general, students did not socialise informally with language assistants outside the classroom (only 24% reported doing this). However, the results show that students who perceived most progress in their language acquisition also had some form of contact outside the classroom. The social occasions mentioned by the

students were cultural events, excursions and sport.

Students' Perception of Their Parents' Opinions of the Scheme

We were interested in whether the students' parents knew about the Language Assistant Scheme. We also wanted to discover whether students' parents were curious about their children's progress in language learning. The data shows that the students valued language assistants' contribution enough to mention it to the parents who according to their children were very interested in their language progress. 94% of students said that their parents were aware that there was a language assistant at school and 88% of them claimed that their parents were interested in their progress in the foreign language.

CONCLUSIONS

- Most students who perceived their performance in all skills as outstanding saw the assistant more than once a week.
- Students who perceived their performance in all skills as outstanding had always both the language assistant and the teacher together in the classroom.
- One third of the students stated they were almost always alone with the language assistant in the classroom.
- There was more interaction between the students and language assistants than between the students and the regular teacher.
- There was a positive response from the students to the language assistant.
- Half of the students preferred having both, the assistant and the teacher at the same time in the classroom.
- The role of the teacher during the lesson was mostly to complement the assistant and help the students.
- Students would like to see the language assistant more than once a week.
- Students did not perceive discipline to be a problem in class with language assistants.
- Formal assessment was, in most cases, not performed by language assistants.
- Skills most practised by the language assistants, as seen by the students, were speaking and reading.
- Students were interested in speaking and learning about the target culture.
- Students did not rate the language assistants' use of visual and audio materials as high as their teaching of conversational skills, explanation of the target culture and clarity.
- According to the students, language assistants used handouts as the most common material.
- Students were familiar with the fact that language assistants took part in some extra-curricular activities.
- A good relationship with the language assistant outside the classroom helped the students with their language.
- According to the students, parents were interested in the Language Assistant Scheme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Students should see the language assistant at least once a week, if possible.
- ❖ Having the assistant and the teacher together in the classroom should be encouraged.

- ❖ Language assistants should continue to deal with practising conversational skills and discussing the target culture.
- ❖ More language assistants and teachers should give the students the opportunity to choose topics.
- ❖ Students should be encouraged to have contact with their language assistant outside the classroom.