

Trends in Foreign Language Didactics Research: a Thematic Analysis of PhD Dissertations from the Czech Republic and Abroad (2006–2012)

Abstract

The aim of this study is to present the results of analyses of PhD dissertations defended abroad and in the Czech Republic in the years 2006–2012 in the field of foreign language didactics. Building on a body of previous work, methodological background for a meta-analysis of the topics of PhD dissertations defended in selected countries abroad as well as for an analysis of PhD dissertations defended in the Czech Republic is presented. The results are then discussed and compared. We conclude that the range of topics addressed in the Czech dissertations does not significantly differ from the state of art abroad, although some areas, such as language learners, seem to be under-researched in the Czech Republic.

Keywords: *foreign language didactics, research, thematic analysis, PhD dissertations.*

Introduction

The efforts to emancipate foreign language didactics (FLD) have been an ongoing and non-linear process launched in the Czech Republic in the 50s of the previous century. The most important milestone of the first generation of the emancipation endeavour is a seminal monograph by Malíř (1971); further on, publications by Beneš (1970) or by Hendrich (1988) documented the development of FLD in the Czech Republic. The latter, however, appeared in a period of relative silence coerced

by the broader political and social context. It is only in the last two decades that attempts to re-constitute FLD can be observed (cf. Píšová, 2011).

The conceptual and research re-constitution is a pre-requisite for the re-institutionalization of FLD in the sense of its incorporation into the family of full-fledged scientific disciplines. Such a status includes both external (or formal) aspects, and internal ones. Although the former cannot be neglected, we believe that the internal ones represent the key emancipation processes. Internal aspects include “an explicit definition of the subject and research methodology of a scientific discipline based on critical analysis of its current [...] state of the art” (Kotásek, 2011, p. 227).

In this article, we are drawing on our previous studies related to FLD research in the Czech Republic. An analysis of articles on education and FLD in five most important Czech educational journals (over the period 2000–2010) was made by Píšová, Janíková and Hanušová (2011). Apart from that, Píšová and Tůma (2012) analyzed 100 abstracts of the most cited articles in FLD from Web of Science published in the years 1990–2012. Their inductive analysis resulted in a thematic map, capturing five areas of central foci of the studies. The foci of German research in the field of FLD were outlined in Janíková (2012), and the results of a thematic and methodological analysis of studies in four international periodicals with the impact factor higher than 1 published in 2010–2011 were discussed by Vlčková (2011).

Furthermore, studies from abroad were taken into consideration. Pokrivčáková (2012, p. 10) offers a summary of annual reviews published in the journal *Language Teaching* over the period 1992–2009, based on which she conducted an analytical probe into FLD research by analyzing eight conference proceedings of a Slovak conference. In addition to these, reviews of doctoral research in selected countries were taken into account (cf., Appendix 1).

Although the above sources indicate that some reviews of FLD research are available, Pokrivčáková (2012, p. 11) notes that “monographs analyzing and evaluating the development of FLE [foreign language education] research are still absent”. In order to capture the structure of the research field in the Czech Republic, analysis of PhD dissertations may be helpful. Doctoral research is a specific area, as Mareš (2013) points out when reviewing studies related to doctoral students and graduates conducted abroad. He also reports on the situation of doctoral graduates in the field of education in the Czech Republic and concludes that although between 1999 and 2011 there were relatively many graduates, only a few started their career as researchers. He calls for more attention to PhD students’ education and their development after defending their PhD dissertations.

Despite the availability of the reviews of PhD dissertations in our field of interest defended in many countries abroad, we were unable to find a review of defended

PhD dissertations in the Czech Republic. Therefore, in this study we offer a comparative view of FLD doctoral research abroad and in the Czech Republic. Our aims are the following: (1) to analyze and aggregate the topics of PhD dissertations in FLD defended at universities abroad, (2) to quantitatively describe the state of the art of PhD dissertations in FLD defended at Czech universities, (3) to analyze the topics of PhD dissertations, (4) to compare the findings related to the Czech Republic with the state of the art abroad.

Research Methodology

Research sample

From the aims of our review it follows that the data came from two sources: dissertations defended abroad and in the Czech Republic. In both cases the dissertations defended over the period 2006–2012, i.e. a period of seven years, were included. The reasons for this choice were the following. First, this period was long enough to capture a variety of topics and as regards Czech dissertations, a period of seven years presented a reasonable sample. Second, the period allowed for including the most current theses¹. Third, the majority of the theses defended in the Czech Republic in this period were accessible online (full texts or abstracts). Next, for the same period, reviews of defended PhD dissertations from other countries were available, which allowed for comparison. Finally, for FLD in the Czech Republic it is the period of increased emancipation efforts as documented by successful accreditation of two new FLD doctoral study programmes, which was a real breakthrough after decades of scientific hibernation.

As far as doctoral research conducted abroad is concerned, we searched for reviews of PhD dissertations on Web of Science. Our intention was to analyze the findings from different reviews in order to compare them with the state of the art in the Czech Republic. Having excluded irrelevant articles from other sub-databases, we arrived at five articles from the category *Education & Educational Research*. These were reviews of doctoral research in England, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United States (cf., Appendix 1).

As regards the review of PhD dissertations defended in the Czech Republic, we started by retrieving a list of accredited university doctoral programmes from the web of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports². First, we selected doctoral

¹ The data were collected in March 2013.

² <http://www.msmt.cz/file/25412>

study programmes and specializations called *Education*³, which are offered at three universities and five faculties: Charles University in Prague: Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Education; Masaryk University, Brno: Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Education; and Palacký University, Olomouc: Faculty of Education. All the dissertations defended at these faculties were included. Next, the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, also offers a specialization called *Foreign language teaching*⁴ under the programme *Philology* – this specialization was also included. Finally, the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, offers a specialization called *Foreign language didactics*⁵, which is accredited under the programme *Specialization in Education*⁶. However, this specialization was opened in 2010 and has not had PhD graduates yet. The lists of dissertations (titles, authors) from the above-mentioned programmes and specializations were retrieved from the official websites of the universities and faculties. Respective online repositories were then searched for more detailed information, i.e. abstracts and full texts.

Category system

As far as the categories for classification are concerned, we built on our previous study (Píšová & Tůma, 2012), in which we conducted an inductive analysis through open coding on the abstracts of 100 most cited articles related to FLD according to Web of Science. A data-driven category system emerged, comprising five major categories, which we outline below (ibid., pp. 14–17).

1. **Learners:** motivation for foreign language learning, learners' identities in social contexts.
2. **Teachers:** teacher education, language teachers' professional competences and foreign language communicative competence, teachers' subjective conceptions of teaching, classroom communication.
3. **Foreign language acquisition and learning (FLAL):** theories of second language acquisition, foreign language learning strategies, age and foreign language learning, attention to form, L1 transfer, formulaic language, differences between the interaction of language learners and native speakers, etc.

³ Pedagogika

⁴ Didaktika konkrétního jazyka

⁵ Didaktika cizího jazyka

⁶ Specializace v pedagogice

4. *Management of teaching / learning processes (MTLP)*: teaching strategies and techniques, methods and approaches, technologies and multimedia in language teaching, assessment.
5. *Key concepts*: mainly theoretical studies related to theoretical concepts in FLD, e.g. intercultural communicative competence, foreign language proficiency.

This category system was used for our analyses of PhD dissertations.

Procedure

First, reviews of PhD dissertations from the five countries were analyzed and the topics aggregated. The reviews were coded into the five categories by two researchers separately, and consequently, consensus was sought.

Prior to embarking upon the analyses, however, two adjustments were made. First, in our original classification (Pířová & Tůma, 2012) curricular aspects, such as syllabi and objectives, were included under the category of *MTLP*. However, from the abstracts of the Czech dissertations dealing with this issue it was clear that several theses were oriented more theoretically or did not fit in the *MTLP* category. Therefore, the theses whose focus was on the content or aims were classified as those related to *Key concepts*. Second, dissertations related to teaching aids and textbooks were classified as those related to *MTLP*. Such works did not appear in the abstracts analyzed by Pířová and Tůma (2012).

Next, an analysis of Czech dissertations was made. After extracting the abstracts⁷ of Czech dissertations, the analysis was conducted in two steps. Initially, the dissertations which were clearly not related to FLD were excluded. Then, the remaining dissertations were classified in the light of the category system introduced above in the same way as the topics of dissertations abroad.

Research Results

In Appendix 1 the results of the thematic analysis of PhD dissertations defended abroad in selected countries can be found.

As far as Czech doctoral research is concerned, a database of 69 dissertations was analyzed. First, we describe the corpus of Czech dissertations. The numbers of

⁷ Where an abstract or full text was not available, only the title of the dissertation was analyzed. This applies to dissertations defended in or before the year 2009 at the faculties of education at Charles University in Prague and Palacký University, Olomouc; and dissertations defended in or before the year 2008 at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

defended dissertations according to years can be seen in Figure 1. Most dissertations were defended in the years 2008 (13), 2009 (12) and 2012 (11). The majority of the dissertations (53) were written in Czech. Two dissertations were in English and two in Slovak. We were unable to retrieve this information for 12 dissertations. Figure 1 also shows the distribution of numbers of dissertations according to individual programmes offered at different faculties. Most dissertations (33) were defended at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague.

Figure 1. Numbers of dissertations defended in the Czech Republic over the period 2006–2012

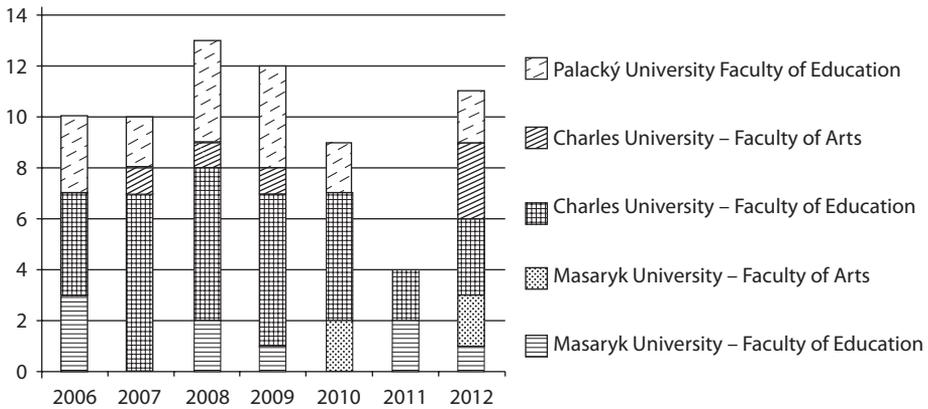
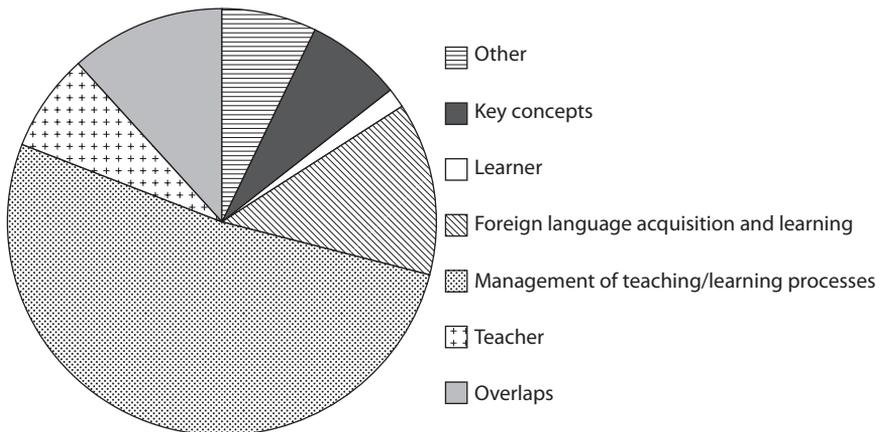


Figure 2. Thematic analysis of Czech PhD dissertations - results



As far as the results of thematic analysis of Czech dissertations are concerned, the distribution of topics can be found in Figure 2. The most dominant topic was *MTLP* (36 occurrences), followed by studies on *FLAL* (9). Five dissertations were related to *Teachers* and another five to *Key concepts*. Only one dissertation fell into the category of *Learner*. Other dissertations (5) were those which did not fit our category system. As regards the *Overlaps*, each of the dissertations in this category included *MTLP* and another category: *FLAL* (4 dissertations), *Key concepts* (3) or *Teacher* (1).

Discussion

The discussion can be opened by reflecting on the results related to PhD dissertations defended abroad. First, it should be pointed out that the five reviews differ as regards the selection of dissertations. Some based the selection criteria on database search (Motha, 2009), others relied on the recommendations of other academics (Drożdżał-Szelest & Pawlak, 2012). Marsden and Graham (2009) briefly overview all dissertations (and analyze the selected ones in detail), whereas in all the other reviews most significant dissertations were preferred. Moreover, the reviews also differed in the emphasis and structure: some focused on rather more specific “fresh themes” (Motha, 2009), whereas others preferred more general areas (Behrent et al., 2011). Although the reviews presented diverse views on doctoral research in the countries, which limits the generalizability of the results⁸, it was possible to conduct a thematic analysis.

The analysis of the topics of PhD dissertations from abroad (Appendix 1) in the light of our category system shows that the topic of *Teacher* seems to be rather under-researched. However, most of the studies related to *MLTP* to some extent include the teacher element and had some implications for foreign language teacher education. This raises the question about the position of an essentially pedeutological issue within the framework of FLD. As regards *Learners*, the most common subtopic seems to be learner differences, as reflected in the reviews from Poland, Spain and England. *MLTP* was presented in all the reviews widely, covering various subtopics such as presentation and practice of grammar and vocabulary, developing skills, testing and dealing with feedback. Technology in language teaching and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) were also

⁸ Another constraint is that each review covered a slightly different time period –cf., Appendix 1.

apparent. As regards *Key concepts*, the comparative lack of studies may reflect more classroom-research orientation of the dissertations. Topics such as language policy and language planning along with more theoretical approaches to culture present the content of *Key concepts* in our study. As regards overlaps in the topics, the most apparent one is presented by the issue learner autonomy. Various links were sought between the *MLTP* (e.g. the use of portfolios) and individual learner qualities (e.g. motivation). Except for the USA, this topic was present in all the reviewed countries. Other overlaps were found between *FLAL* and *MLTP*.

Each of the reviews also addressed missing topics and problems of PhD research in the countries. As regards topics, some reviewers call for more research in the field of ICT in foreign language teaching (Behrent et al., 2011; Motha, 2009), others refer to age groups and point out that more attention should be paid to primary and secondary education, since most studies in their reviews were in tertiary settings (Marsden & Graham, 2009; Serrano & Miralpeix, 2013). Overall, the authors of the reviews suggest that more complex studies should be conducted, focusing on connections to SLA theories, relations to globalization and multilingualism, etc. Apart from that, methodological and theoretical issues are addressed (Marsden & Graham, 2009).

The distribution of topic, as outlined in Appendix 1, to some extent exemplifies the conception of FLD in the countries. For instance, the topics covered in the USA represent rather an applied-linguistic focus of the studies, which reflects a different paradigmatic orientation of the theoretical and empirical reflection of this aspect of educational reality. This fact may be linked to different traditions in the conceptualization of theory and research into foreign language learning / teaching, namely the Anglo-Saxon and the Central European ones (Gundem & Hopmann, 2002).

As far as doctoral research in the Czech Republic is concerned, the quantitative data reveal some interesting findings. Out of the total of 69 dissertations, two were written within the programme of Philology and 67 under Education. The latter can be compared with the statistics offered by Mareš (2013): for the period 1999–2011 there were, in total, 549 PhD graduates in the field of Education, i.e. on average 42 graduates per year. In our sample we had the total of 67 Education graduates (2006–2012), i.e. slightly fewer than ten graduates per year. By comparing the two figures it seems that a considerable proportion of dissertations defended in Education was occupied by dissertations in FLD. More generally, from the statistics it follows that the faculties of education concentrated more on FLD than faculties of arts (cf. Mareš 2013, p. 11).

The distribution of dissertations within the years (Figure 1) shows a relatively stable number of defended dissertations every year (9–13) except 2011. Mareš

(2013, pp. 11–13) observed a similar tendency in the doctoral programmes in *Education* generally, which he attributed to increasing demands from the Accreditation Commission since 2008 in order to improve the quality of dissertations and also to the emancipation of subject matter didactics. The drop in 2011 in our data can be explained as a co-incidence of comparatively lower numbers of graduates at certain faculties (and relatively higher numbers of defences along with the first two graduates in a FLD specialization under Philology in 2012).

As far as the topics of Czech PhD dissertations are concerned, we adopt a comparative perspective. Similarly to the situation abroad (as reflected in the reviews), most attention was paid to *MTLP* (e.g. teaching reading, ICT, “alternatives”: drama, Waldorf education; testing and assessment, classroom communication, textbooks, etc.). Overlaps were found mainly between *MTLP* and *FLAL*. Next, *Teacher*-related dissertations were rather infrequent. Contrary to the situation abroad, Czech doctoral research paid little attention to *Learners* (the only dissertation dealt with university graduates’ language qualifications) and to *FLAL* (Czech dissertations were related mainly to the role of language transfer). Another difference was that only one dissertation dealt with learner autonomy.

The results of this thematic analysis of Czech PhD dissertations do not significantly differ from the findings provided by our previous thematic analyses (Píšová, Janíková & Hanušová, 2011, Píšová & Tůma, 2012). In all of them the richest field of researchers’ interest is the category labeled *MTLP*; it is, at the same time, the category which most frequently overlaps. Further on, the category of *Learners* seemed slightly under-researched, and more attention especially to primary and lower secondary age group seemed desirable.

Conclusions

Our thematic analysis of PhD dissertations from the Czech Republic and abroad (2006–2012) and the confrontation of its results with our previous studies dealing with research foci in FLD aimed to help systemize the vast and diverse research field. The diversity is linked to the characteristics of the discipline: the reflection of the empirical reality of teaching and learning a variety of foreign languages is covered “under one roof” of FLD. Therefore, various culturally determined approaches and conceptualizations have evolved over time. In addition to that, paradigmatic plurality, typical of social sciences and humanities, and the tension between the referential scientific disciplines play an important role (cf. Gundem & Hopmann, 2002). Our analysis, e.g., proves that in the English speaking countries

more attention is paid to foreign/ second language acquisition, which proves the strength of applied linguistics rather than the didactic tradition typical of Central European tradition.

Generally speaking, however, the results indicate that FLD doctoral research abroad in a relatively balanced way covers the broad spectrum of thematic areas of FLD. The choice of research topics reflects social demands – most current “hot issues” (e.g. multilingualism, CLIL, autonomy) are addressed in a sufficient way. In addition to that, missing or under-researched issues were identified and pinpointed as an impulse for future research.

As regards the comparative perspective, the range of topics addressed in the Czech dissertations does not differ from the state of art abroad in a significant way, though lack of some specific accents was identified (e.g. attention paid to foreign language learners and their autonomy). However, our thematic analysis of PhD dissertation shows that we have a new generation of promising researchers in FLD in the Czech Republic, which is a sine qua non for the development of the discipline after long years of relative silence caused by the political context.

Our study presented a thematic analysis of doctoral dissertations. In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the majority of dissertations were empirical studies. Therefore, two recommendations for further analyses should be formulated. Firstly, more attention should be paid to research methodology deployed in the dissertations and in FLD in general. Secondly, it is crucial for the development of the discipline to pursue also theoretical research leading to the development of meta-didactics representing the “conscience” of the discipline (Choděra, 2006, pp. 36–38).

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Appendix 1

The results of thematic analysis of PhD dissertations defended abroad (selected countries)

| Country (authors) | Corpus | Teacher | Learner | SLA and FL learning | Management of teaching/ learning processes | Key concepts | Overlaps |
|---|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| The USA (Motha, 2009) | 15 dissertations (2006–2007) | Non-native English-speaking teachers Applied corpus analysis | Language socialization L2 learners' literacy in high schools | Language learning opportunities Corpora and on-line reference tools in language learning Phonological acquisition Conversation analysis in pre-school years Second-/Foreign language pragmatics | Corrective feedback within computer-mediated communication Teacher feedback Task complexity | Language policy | Language ideologies and language learning Private speech |
| Germany (Behrent, Doff, Marx, Zielger 2011) | 38 dissertations (2006–2009) | – | – | – | Foreign language teaching in primary school | – | CLIL and multilingual pedagogy Learner autonomy Multimedia and language learning |
| Poland (Drożdżal-Szelest, Pawlak, 2012) | 25 dissertations (2006–2010) | – | – | – | Language skills and sub-systems Assessment Miscellaneous ¹ | Culture: Intercultural competence, cross-cultural differences | Learner autonomy Individual learner differences ² |
| Spain (Serrano & Miralpeix, 2013) | 16 dissertations (2008–2010) | – | Motivation as an individual learner difference | Interlanguage pragmatics Language learning by immigrant populations | CLIL Classroom language teaching | – | The development of speaking abilities and the acquisition of foreign language sounds Learner autonomy Study abroad |

| Country (authors) | Corpus | Teacher | Learner | SLA and FL learning | Management of teaching/ learning processes | Key concepts | Overlaps |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|--|---|-------------------|---|
| England (Marsden & Graham, 2009) | 47 dissertations (2006) | Language teacher education and cognition | Specific language impairment and English as an additional language Motivation as an individual learner difference ³ | L2 acquisition from various linguistic perspectives Sociolinguistic studies in immigrant, migrant or minority communities (ethnographic research) | Scaffolding during project work Teachers' motivational techniques for L2 teaching Vocabulary teaching practices Cultural background and use of ICT in L2 classrooms Using sign language to hearing children Textbook analysis Perceptions of a language course English for Specific Purposes programme English for Academic Purposes programme Error correction techniques Teaching idioms Computer-assisted language learning | Language planning | Learner autonomy Developing learner strategies |

¹ This category included: teaching English to young learners, development of discourse competence, classroom interaction.

² These included learning strategies (i.e. *Foreign language acquisition and learning*) and the influence of individual differences on attainment.

³ These included the relationship between attitudes, learning styles and experiences of language learning, and attitudes to project-based learning.