

CHAPTER 2

Beliefs about foreign language knowledge

Madalena Teixeira (ULICES⁶/ESE,IPS⁷)

Ann Henshall (ULICES⁸/ISEG, UTL⁹)

In today's world, which has increasingly become a "global village", knowledge of languages has acquired a crucial role for the full integration and interaction of individuals in society. We emphasise integration and interaction, in order to point out that communication, hence language "in its larger construct" is, in our view, the only way that we can truly know, understand and interpret *the other*. However, students from different levels of secondary education in Portugal seem to have a perspective on languages that differs, as evidenced by the results presented in the *Report of Examinations* (2011) in German, Spanish, English and French in school years prior to entry into higher education. The report notes that although the items that showed the poorest results in the national examinations of French and English corresponded to passing grades – 50.3% and 50.2% (French), and 53.3%, 54.4 and 51.2%, (English) – they do not differ significantly from those of German and Spanish, 43.3% and 40.8%, respectively. Furthermore, these items are related to aspects of linguistic correction, involving vocabulary, spelling, morphology, and syntax. Although the *Report of Examinations* analyses students in secondary schools, these are the students who will be going to university. It is therefore of interest to explore how the understanding of what underpins foreign language knowledge develops as young people progress through their tertiary studies, in which they are exposed to linguistics.

In order to better understand these young peoples' positions with regard to foreign language knowledge, Part 2 of the questionnaire focussed on their

⁶ University of Lisbon Center for English Studies.

⁷ Escola Superior de Educação, Instituto Politécnico de Santarém.

⁸ University of Lisbon Center for English Studies.

⁹ School of Economics and Management, Technical University of Lisbon.

beliefs about what knowledge of a foreign language entails. A set of six questions concerned the importance the respondents attribute to formal systemic features of language use: correct use of grammar rules (9a), good pronunciation (9d); communicative aspects: ability to write texts fluently and correctly (9c), ability to understand the foreign language speakers (9f); and cultural aspects: knowledge of the cultures and customs of the mother-tongue speakers of the language (9b), and having a wide vocabulary (9e). A further three questions sought to compare the importance of aspects of foreign language knowledge that are traditionally valued by grammar-translation teaching methodologies with aspects valued by early communicative language teaching methodologies. Question 10 addressed stereotypes related to writing and speaking (10a), fluency and pronunciation (10b) and knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. The first set of questions asked respondents to rate each characteristic as very important, important, not very important, or don't know. The second set presented statements to be marked as true or false.

The following section will analyse the results, first globally, then taking into account the variables *number of linguistics units studied* and *university*. The section will finish with some final remarks on the results for the students' beliefs about what is meant by knowledge of a foreign language.

The median values for the items in question 9 fall into two groups: correct and fluent writing and having good oral comprehension were rated as very important while all the other items were rated as important. Although this may suggest that the students privilege the communicative aspects of knowledge of a foreign language, a more detailed examination of the results suggests a more complex picture.

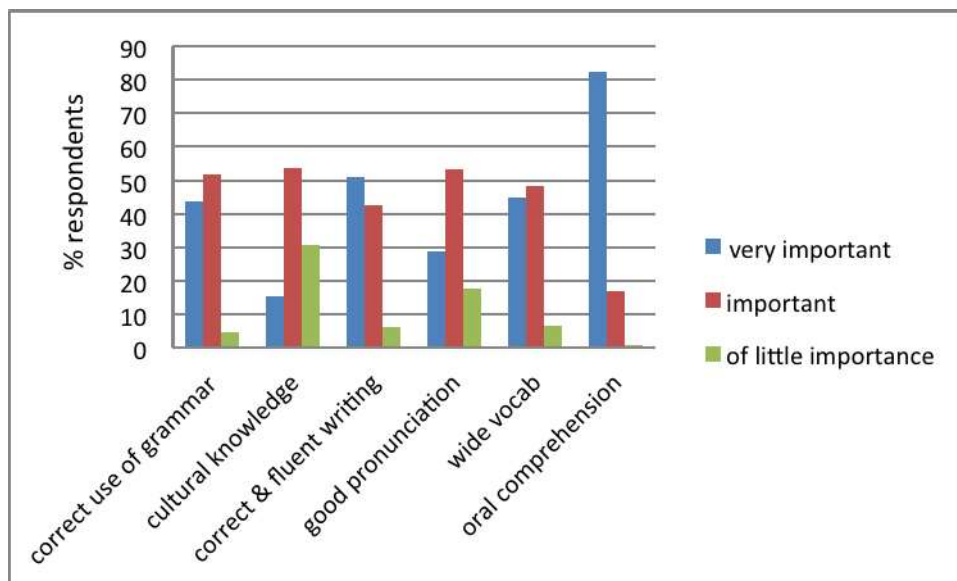


Figure 2.1: Importance attributed to aspects of foreign language knowledge (%).

Figure 2.1 shows the importance attributed to aspects of foreign language knowledge. The most striking result is that the ability to understand the speakers of a foreign language is highly valued with 81.4% of the students classifying it as *very important* and a further 16.7% classifying it as *important*. Several factors may contribute to this result. The first is that exposure to foreign languages permeates the media in Portugal. With the exception of cartoons, neither films nor television programs are dubbed, and pop songs in foreign languages make up a large proportion of the songs played on the radio on many channels. The Internet provides another source; not only does it supplement or even supplant traditional media, but it offers exposure to foreign languages through posts on YouTube, blogs, podcasts, and so on. While much of the content is in English, it is not restricted to this language. A second factor stems from Portugal's strong tourist industry. The annual influx of foreign language speakers means that it is common to hear foreign languages being spoken. The opportunities for listening to foreign languages clearly outstrip those for written production, which may account for the lower values attributed to writing fluent and correct texts. On this item 50.3% of the respondents considered it to be very important, 42.1% considered it important, and only 6.3% classed it as not very important. It is to be noted both these items, whose

median was deemed very important, reflect the communicative function of a foreign language.

Within the second group, whose median value was *important*, a subgroup comprises the correct use of grammar and having a wide vocabulary. The values for these two items approximate those for written production, albeit with an inversion in the values attributed to *important* and *very important*. Nonetheless, these features are highly valued, with only 4.7% and 6.6% rating them as *not important*. The other subgroup, comprising knowledge of culture and having a good pronunciation, is clearly less valued. Although just over 50% of the respondents considered these items to be *important*, the values for *not important* are higher than any other item: 30.2% and 17.6% respectively. Two points might be made about these results. While knowledge of the foreign language speakers' customs and having a wide vocabulary reflect aspects of cultural knowledge of a language, the latter contributes more directly to language production. This communicative factor may account for the greater value attributed to a wide vocabulary range. The second point concerns the lower values attributed to having a good pronunciation. It is generally accepted that due to the complexity of the phonetics of European Portuguese, these speakers have little difficulty in learning to pronounce the phonetic systems of many other languages. Consequently, because the students do not perceive pronunciation to be a problem, they may not value it as very important.

It is to be stressed that the above analysis provides a global reading of the respondents' beliefs of what knowledge of a foreign language entails. Other attitudes and beliefs may come to light with a more detailed analysis using the variables of this study. In particular, we were interested in whether the study of linguistics would affect their responses. The respondents to this questionnaire had no knowledge of linguistics, or had studied one or two units of it, or 3 or more. The distribution of the 318 respondents across the three groups is given in Figure 2.2.

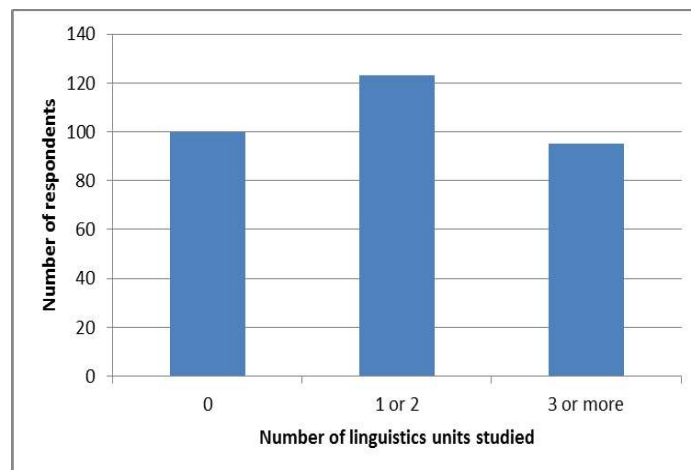


Figure 2.2: Distribution of respondents (units) by number of linguistic units studied.

When the variable *number of linguistics units studied* is taken into account, with the exception of having good pronunciation, the results did not attain statistical significance. Despite this, the study of linguistics did seem to have an impact on the respondents' beliefs about foreign language knowledge. The results for each item will be presented separately.

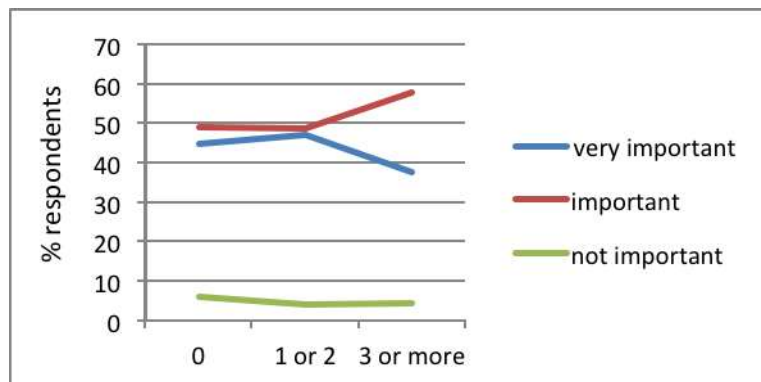


Figure 2.3: Importance attributed to correct grammar use of a foreign language by number of linguistics units studied.

Question 9a concerned the value respondents placed on being able to use the grammar of the foreign language correctly (Figure 2.3). The results show that there is a minimal movement between the beliefs held by students with no knowledge of linguistics and those who have completed one or two units of linguistics; those considering correct grammar use not important

decline slightly from 6.1% to 4.1% and those considering it very important rise marginally from 44.9% to 47.2%. This suggests that students who have studied 1 or 2 units of linguistics regard grammar as slightly more important than those with no linguistic knowledge. However, the insignificant trend is clearly reversed for the students who have completed 3 or more linguistics units. Although the values remain constant for those who consider that correct grammar use is not important, there is a decrease of almost 10% in those who find it very important and a concomitant increase in those who find it important. These results do not show statistical significance¹⁰, but they might suggest that the study of one or two linguistics units has little impact on the beliefs of students with regard to the importance of correct grammar use and it is only in the later years that the beliefs undergo greater change, and students accord less importance to correct grammar use in a foreign language.

A tentative explanation for these findings might lie in teaching methodologies that the students have been exposed to in earlier cycles of education. Although more recent foreign language communicative teaching methodologies clearly articulate the importance of grammatical knowledge for a communicative act, this perspective is not always brought out in the classroom. Often students in secondary school are immersed in learning contexts in which grammatical rules are decontextualized and the functional and socio-cultural aspects that constrain their use are ignored. In other words, the foreign language grammar is not taught as a functional aspect of the foreign language; rather it is set apart to be learned for its own sake. This view, which would regard grammar as important for its own sake, might carry over for the students in their initial years of study at university.

Because the complexity of written texts progresses over the course of studies, and students are evaluated primarily through writing, we were also interested in how they viewed the importance of the ability to write texts in a foreign language (Figure 2.4).

¹⁰ The Chi-Square tests are not valid because more than 20% (22.2%) of the expected counts are less 5.

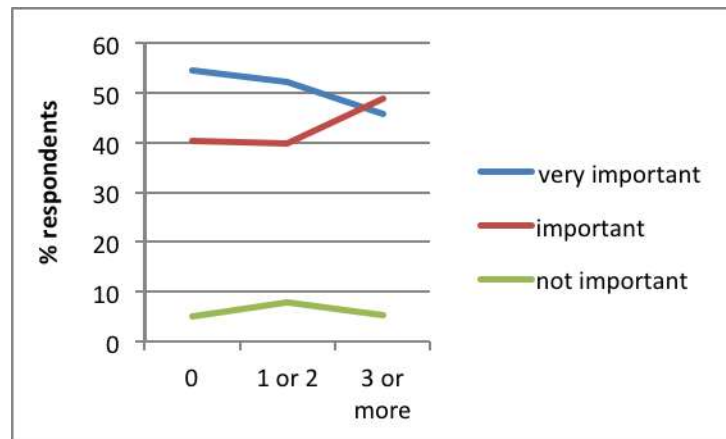


Figure 2.4: Importance attributed to the ability to write correct and fluent texts in a foreign language by number of linguistic units studied.

The results for the importance attributed to correct and fluent writing in a foreign language (question 9c) show a similar trend to those for correct grammar use in so far as the relative share considering it very important declines from 52% to 45.7% and those considering it important rises from 39.8% to 48.9% as the respondents' exposure to linguistics increases from 1 or 2 units to 3 or more. The importance attributed to correct and fluent writing also decreases from the respondents with no linguistic knowledge to those with 1 or 2 units. This is indicated in the declining trend for very important and the rising trend in not important. Thus, there appears to be an overall declining trend in the importance attributed to correct and fluent writing as the number of units of linguistics studied increases even though the results did not attain statistical significance¹¹.

The results for the importance of correct grammar use and correct and fluent writing warrant further reflection given that the latter implies the former. It is observed that respondents judge, overall, that writing is very important and that grammatical rules are important. How is it possible to write with correct grammar without knowing the standard of written discourse? Did the respondents answer randomly or do they consider that writing and grammar

¹¹ The Chi-square tests are valid but the relation is not statistically significant. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.86.

are independent of each other? In other words, do they believe that it is possible to learn how to write without having a knowledge of grammatical rules such as syntax, spelling or even morphology? Moreover, it is disturbing to note that the results for *not important* hardly oscillate between students who have never studied linguistics (5.1%) and those with three or more linguistic units (5.4%), which suggests that for the latter students, the learning process over the course of their studies has been ineffectual. Indeed, an exploratory study carried out by Teixeira & Azevedo (2012) shows that students in their first year of the 1st cycle of higher studies, who have not yet completed any linguistic units, need support to fulfil the demands of the written tasks they are set: "...throughout the writing process, students must be clearly guided and supervised by teachers, in an early stage, in order to be able, further on, to overcome their difficulties and become autonomous and reflective in writing tasks (and others) that they carry out." Such a claim indicates that the monitoring of the writing process by teachers should be a constant.

Question 9 (d) concerned the importance the respondents attribute to the importance of good pronunciation in a foreign language (Figure 2.5).

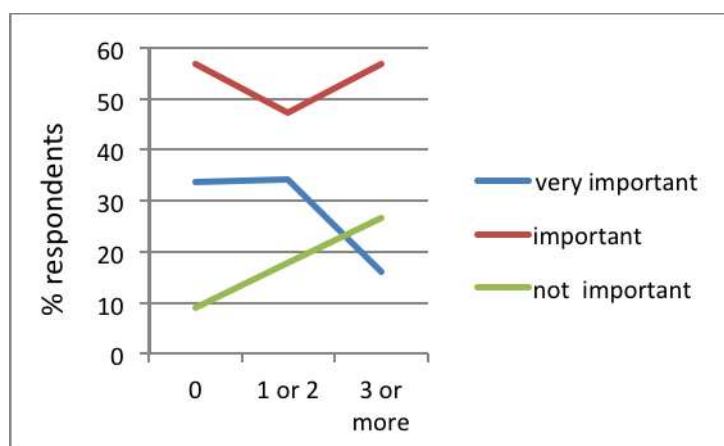


Figure 2.5: Importance attributed to good pronunciation of a foreign language by number of linguistics units studied.

Unlike the other items in question 9, the results for the importance of good pronunciation in a foreign language were found to be statistically

significant¹². There is a clear declining trend for importance in the responses. While the number of responses for not important increases steadily from 9.2% to 26.9% over the course of study of linguistics, those for very important remain quite constant for the students who have completed 0 or 1 or 2 units of linguistics, 33.7% and 34.4% respectively, then drop by more than half to 16.1% for the students who have completed 3 or more linguistics units. This drop in the number of responses classed as very important is offset by a concomitant rise in the responses classed important, the values of which attain 47.5% and 57.0% for the students who have studied 1 or 2 linguistics units and those who have studied 3 or more respectively.

Taken overall, the results of these three items (9a – correct grammar use, 9c – correct and fluent writing and 9d – good pronunciation) indicate that the greater the number of linguistics units studied, the less the respondents value these aspects of foreign language knowledge as very important. While writing texts is a communicative act, writing texts fluently and *correctly* implies formal, systemic language knowledge. Hence, these results suggest that the study of linguistics contributes to relativizing the importance of such formal systemic features of a foreign language. In particular, a possible explanation for the declining importance attributed to pronunciation is that the study of linguistics contributes to the students understanding that while a standard pronunciation of a foreign language is considered correct, a standard is nonetheless arbitrary, and many other equally correct pronunciations exist. Greater linguistic knowledge therefore suggests greater awareness of and tolerance towards variety.

By contrast, there is little variation in the values for the importance of being able to understand the speakers of a foreign language as students increase their exposure to linguistics (Figure 2.6 below).

¹² The Chi-square tests are valid and the relation is statistically significant. 0 cells (.0%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 16.64. Notation: $\chi^2(4) = 16.968$, $p = 0.002$ ($p < 0.05$). For this reason, there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of units and the importance attributed to pronunciation.

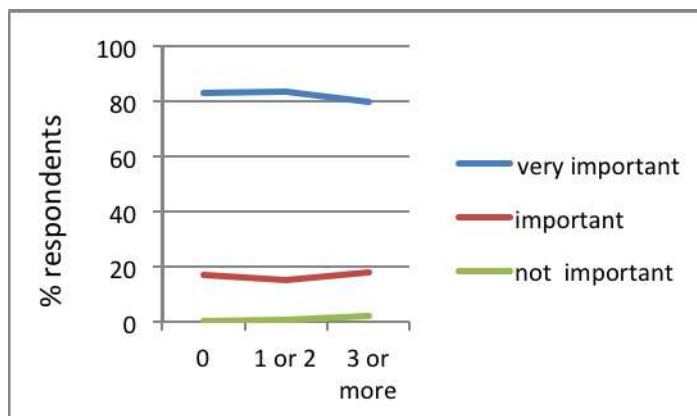


Figure 2.6: Importance attributed to oral comprehension of the speakers of a foreign language by number of linguistics units studied.

The percentage of respondents classifying oral comprehension as very important varies by less than 4%, those classifying it as important by less than 3% and those classifying it as not important by 2.2% among the three groups: no / 1 or 2 / 3 or more linguistic units. The high value placed on oral comprehension is reflected in the median, as previously discussed. It would seem that the importance of this communicative aspect of language knowledge is little affected by the study of linguistics although the results did not attain statistical significance¹³.

Figure 2.7 shows the results for the importance attributed to lexical knowledge.

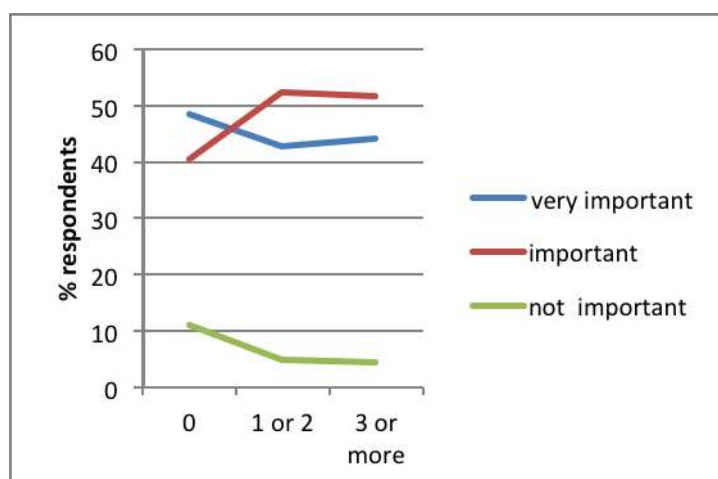


Figure 2.7: Importance attributed to having a wide vocabulary in the foreign language by number of linguistic units studied.

¹³ The Chi-square tests are not valid because 3 cells (33.3%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 0.89.

Overall, the values for the extreme positions – very important and not important – are higher for respondents with no linguistic knowledge than for those who have completed 3 or more units of linguistics. The increase in the number of respondents who consider it important to have a wide vocabulary in the foreign language suggests a trend towards a central position with regard to vocabulary. It is of note, however, that the major change takes place between the respondents with no linguistics knowledge and those who have completed 1 or two units. Although not statistically significant¹⁴, these results may indicate that a little exposure to linguistics has an impact on students' beliefs with regard to the importance they attribute to having a wide vocabulary in a foreign language.

In fact, an individual's lexical knowledge results from a number of factors. In particular, social and economic factors, reading, including comprehension and interpretation of the text, and the individual's level of writing skills and grammar all affect their lexicon. It is to be noted that the results for the items correct and fluent writing, correct grammar use and a wide vocabulary are similar, albeit not the same. In other words, the respondents believe these three skills are essential components in knowledge of a foreign language. Indeed, we cannot and nor should we separate lexical knowledge from writing or grammar insofar as spelling, semantics, diachrony, synchrony and the relations of meaning between words are concerned.

Because learning a language does not only involve knowledge of its structure, but also cultural knowledge, one question concerned knowledge of the customs and cultures of the native speakers of the foreign language. The results for this item are shown in Figure 2.8.

¹⁴ The Chi-square tests are valid but the relation is not statistically significant. 0 cells (.0%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.22.

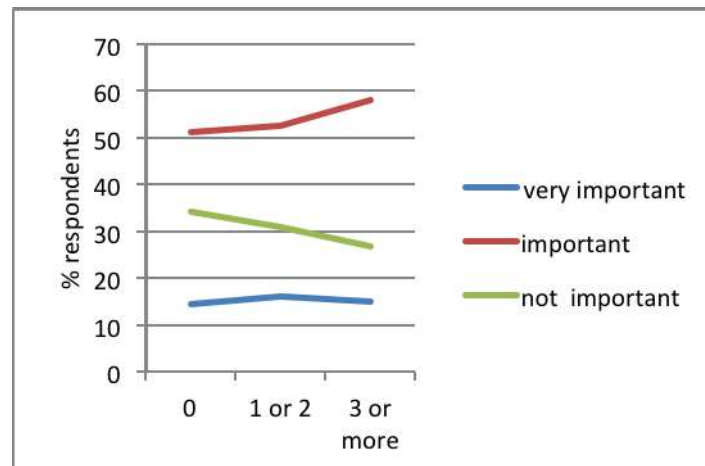


Figure 2.8: Importance attributed to knowledge of the customs and cultures of the native speakers of the foreign language by number of linguistics units studied.

The results show that as students' knowledge of linguistics increases, the figures for those who consider such socio-cultural knowledge very important remain relatively constant while the figures for those who consider it important increase and those who consider it unimportant decrease. The fact that there is a steady declining trend in those who consider this item unimportant suggests that the study of linguistics does have an impact on students' beliefs with regard to the importance of knowing about the customs and cultures of the peoples who speak the foreign language. The greater their knowledge of linguistics, the more they value such knowledge. Nonetheless, even after studying 3 or more linguistics units, more than a quarter of the respondents continued to regard knowledge of the customs and cultures of the native speakers of the foreign language as unimportant¹⁵.

These results appear to be relevant especially if we consider that many college students with knowledge of linguistics seem to devalue such social and cultural aspects, which we believe to be intrinsically linked to and inseparable from language. In 1976 Dittmar already incorporates language in a social perspective:

¹⁵ The Chi-square tests are valid but the relation is not statistically significant. 0 cells (.0%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 14.35.

From an ecological viewpoint we view the language as an integral part of a larger Picture of the community and all of things the community does. (...) because every 'someone' is, or has been, a living, breathing, thinking, feeling member of community. In other words, every instance of language is or has been an integral working and feeding and making shelter and playing and fighting and laughing and crying and mating (p. 121).

We shall now turn to the results for the variable *university*. Analysis of the the respondents' perceptions of the importance of aspects of knowledge that underpin foreign language knowledge using university as the independent variable showed similar trends across the three regions, north, centre and south in the order of the ranking of items across the options of *very important*, *important*, *not important*, but there were variations in the values assigned to each category. A description of the results follows.

The results for question 9(a), which concerns the importance placed on correct grammar use, are shown in Figure 2.9.

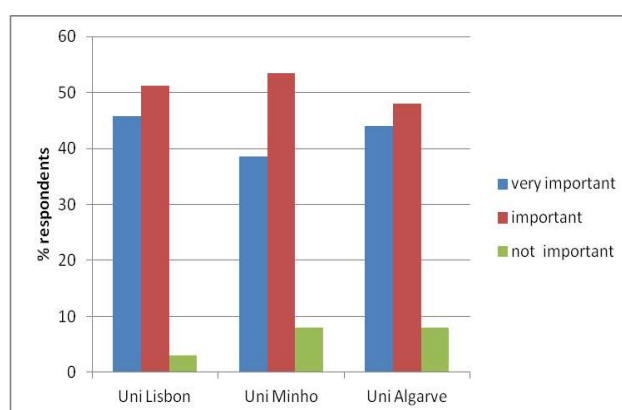


Figure 2.9: Importance attributed to correct grammar use in a foreign language by university.

There is no significant difference among the values for each university; in each case the option *important* is the most frequent response. The largest difference between the values for *important* and *very important* – 14.8% - was found in the University of Minho while the University of Lisbon and the University of the Algarve registered 5.4% and 4% respectively. Also of note is the fact that the option *not important* was selected in all three universities. The

lowest values for this option were obtained in the University of Lisbon while the Universities of the Minho and the Algarve show similar, slightly higher values.¹⁶

Figure 2.10 shows the results for the importance the respondents attribute to knowing the customs and cultures of the native speakers of the language. Overall, the respondents consider such knowledge to be important. The highest values for *important* were obtained in the University of Lisbon (UL), followed by the University of the Minho (UM) and lastly the University of the Algarve (UALG). Interestingly, the second most frequent response was *not important*, with UALG and UM obtaining around 30% and 40 % respectively. The least frequent response was *very important*, which we find somewhat unexpected. It is worth noting that the highest values for *very important* were found in UALG, where just under 30% of the respondents found such cultural knowledge very important.¹⁷

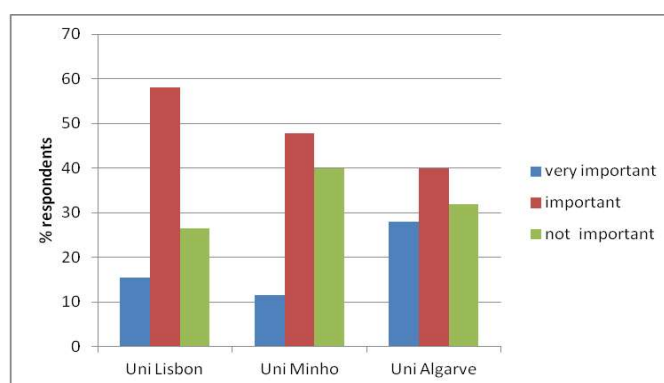


Figure 2.10: Importance attributed to knowing the customs and cultures of the native speakers of the foreign language by university.

The highest values for *very important*, which were obtained in the University of the Algarve, might be explained by the fact that the Algarve has perhaps the most developed tourist infrastructures of Portugal and foreign tourists, hence speakers of different languages and cultures, are an important source of economic revenue. Similarly, the lowest values for *not important*,

¹⁶ The Chi-Square tests are invalid because more than 20% (22.2) of the expected counts are less than 5.

¹⁷ The Chi-square tests are valid but the relation between the two variables is not statistically significant.

which were found in Lisbon, may be due to its cultural and economic mix. Lisbon has a high level of entrepreneurial business activity. For example there are 32,644 firms operating in the automotive sector and 7,608 in the hotel industry¹⁸.

Question 9 also addressed the importance the respondents attribute to fluent and correct writing. The results for this item are shown in Figure 2.11. Again the results were similar across the three universities, especially for the option *very important*. Although the option *important* was less frequently chosen than *very important*, with the exception of the University of the Algarve, the difference in the values obtained in the Universities of Lisbon and the Minho is less than 10%. The option *not important* was selected in all universities, but its value was significantly lower than the other options.

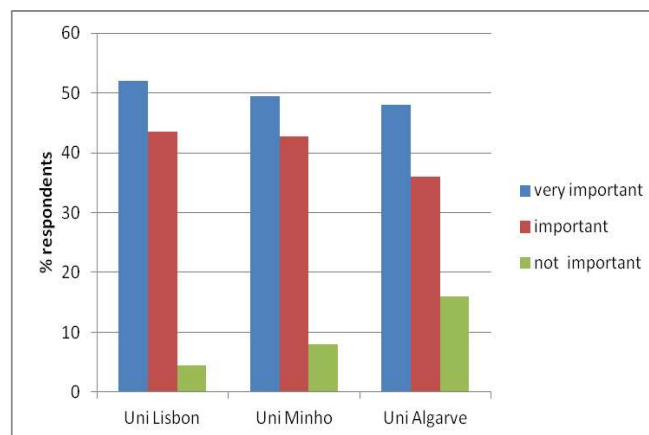


Figure 2.11: Importance attributed to correct and fluent writing by university.

Of note is that the responses are more evenly spread in the results for the University of the Algarve: 48%, 36% and 16% for *very important*, *important*, and *not important* respectively. In the other two universities it is the difference between the values for *very important* and *not important* that stand out: 47.5% in the University of Lisbon and 41.5% in the University of the Minho.

¹⁸ Available at <http://www.ine.pt/prodserv/quadros/116/218/010/xls/00100000.xls-Microsoft>. Accessed: 01 October 2012.

By contrast, the values obtained for the option *not important* were higher for the importance attributed to correct pronunciation of a foreign language than for the importance of correct and fluent writing. This was the case both in aggregate terms (17.9%) and for each university (UL, 19.5%; UM, 15.9% and UALG, 12%), as shown in Figure 2.12.

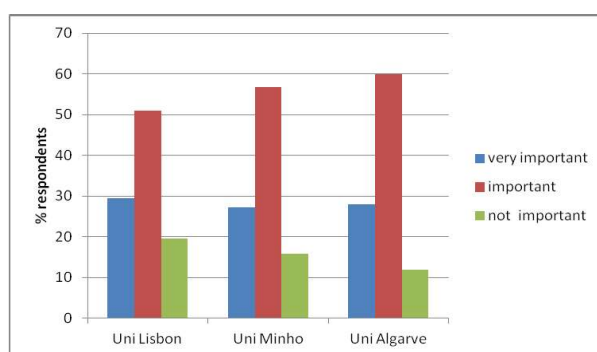


Figure 2.12: Importance attributed to correct pronunciation of a foreign language by university.

While the University of Lisbon obtained the highest values of the three universities for the option *not important*, its values for *important* were the lowest – 51%. The highest percentage – 60% - was registered by the University of the Algarve, followed by the University of Minho, with 56.8%. The option *very important* made up a similar percentage in the three universities¹⁹

Figure 2.13 shows the results for the question concerning the importance the respondents attribute to having a wide vocabulary in a foreign language.

¹⁹ The Chi-square tests are valid but there is no statistically significant relation between the two variables. 1 cell (11.1%) has an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.47.

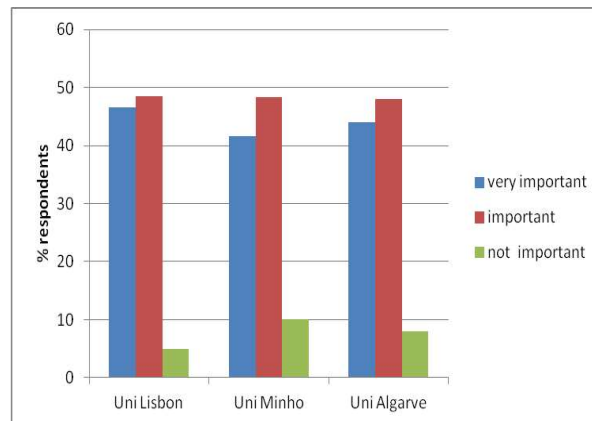


Figure 2.13: Importance attributed to having a wide vocabulary in a foreign language by university.

There was little variation across the universities with regard to the importance attributed to having a wide vocabulary. The option *very important* accounted for 46.5% (UL), 41.6% (UM) and 44% (UALG). The results for *important* show the highest values and are more homogeneous: 48.5% (UL), 48.3% (UM) and 48% (UALG). The option *not important* was least selected, with values ranging from 5% to 10.1%. These results did not attain statistical significance²⁰.

The relations among words give rise to meaning-making, not just in a linguistic perspective, but also in interaction with 'the other'. This is what makes a language a living and functioning organism. For this reason, the respondents were asked to rate the importance of understanding 'the other', in this case, speakers of the foreign language. These results are shown in Figure 2.14.

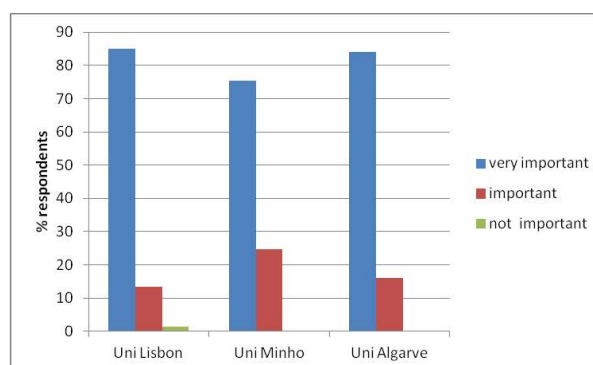


Figure 2.14: Importance attributed to oral comprehension by university.

²⁰ 1 cell (11.1%) has an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.67. The chi-square tests are valid, but there is no statistically significant relation between the two variables.

What is most striking about these results are the very high values for the option *very important* in all three universities: 85.1% in UL, 75.3% in UM and 84% in UALG. Furthermore, the results for UL and UALG are similar. The values for *important* are much lower: 13.4% in UL, 24.7% in UM and 16% in UALG. Interestingly, not a single respondent from the universities of the Minho or the Algarve selected *not important*. In other words the result for these universities was zero, which indicates that these students consider oral comprehension of a foreign language to be undeniably important, an attitude that implies comprehension *of* and *with* the interlocutor. Only 1.5% of the respondents from the University of Lisbon selected *not important*.

While it is not possible to confirm the statistical significance of these results²¹, it would appear that the importance attributed to understanding speakers of the foreign language does not vary according to the region where the students are studying. This result might in part be attributed to the aims and homogeneity of education and the teaching methodologies if we consider that the role of the teacher goes beyond the regulatory statutes that guide the profession in order to reach out to each class. In doing so the teacher mediates and facilitates access to knowledge, opening new perspectives on the one hand, and helping to (re)co-construct on the other. If so, it would seem that teachers contribute positively with regard to this issue. A second factor could lie in the homogeneity of student life for these respondents. As previously mentioned, their use of foreign-language media is probably high, and this could contribute to their wishing to understand the spoken language directly, without the mediation of subtitles or a translator. The better their comprehension, the greater the range of materials and speakers they would have access to.

The second half of Part 2 of the questionnaire sought to explore stereotypical beliefs about foreign language knowledge that are associated with

²¹ The Chi-square tests are not valid because more than 20% (44%) of the expected counts are less than 5, and there are expected counts that are less than one (0.24).

traditional grammar-translation models of language teaching: that writing is more important than speaking; or with early communicative models of language teaching: that fluency is more important than pronunciation, and that having a wide vocabulary is more important than knowledge of grammar. These beliefs were addressed through statements that the respondents marked as true or false. The results for these items are given in Figure 2.8.

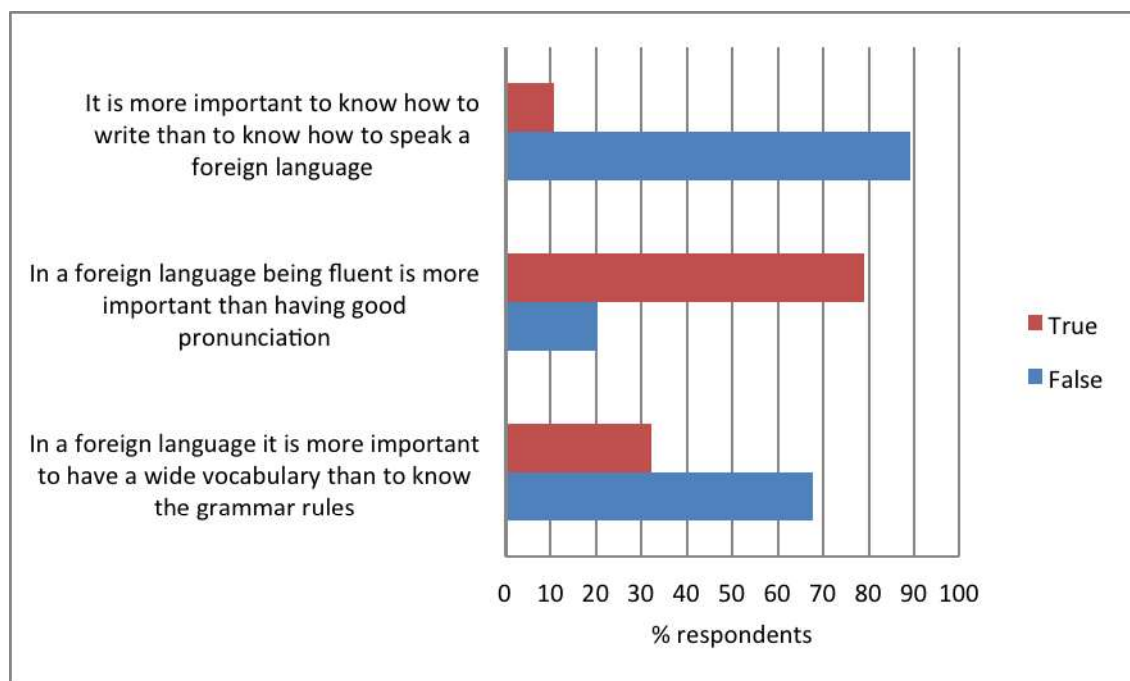


Figure 2.15: Stereotypical beliefs about the relative importance of aspects of foreign language knowledge.

The stereotype that it is more important to know how to write a foreign language than to know how to speak it reflects values associated with grammar-translation teaching methodologies. The respondents clearly reject such a stereotype; 89% of the respondents found the statement false. By contrast, more than three quarters of the respondents (78.9%) agree that fluency in a foreign language is more important than good pronunciation. As already noted earlier in Chapter 2, mainland Portuguese speakers tend to have little difficulty in learning the phonetic systems of many other languages. This may lead them devalue pronunciation in relation with other aspects of language knowledge. Notwithstanding this, the results for these two items suggest that

most students value the communicative function of a foreign language, and this may reflect the values of communicative language teaching methodologies. Yet, it does not mean that they disregard the importance of grammatical knowledge; 67.6% of the respondents found the third stereotype, that a wide vocabulary is more important than knowledge of grammar, to be false. This latter fact suggests that many students hold a more complex view of what is implied by foreign language knowledge and do not subscribe to stereotypical views. It is to be noted, nevertheless, that almost a third of the respondents do believe that a wide vocabulary is more important than grammatical knowledge.

The aim of this section was to explore how students in tertiary institutions in Portugal rate the importance of knowledge of a foreign language grammar, vocabulary and culture, as well as the importance of correct pronunciation and writing and oral comprehension skills, and to see whether there were differences in the beliefs based on the number of linguistics units they had completed or university affiliation, Lisbon, Minho and the Algarve. However, as noted in the description of the results, in general it was not possible to determine any statistical significance in the results. The only result that attained statistical significance was the importance of correct pronunciation, where it was found that the study of linguistics has an impact on the importance the respondents attribute to correct pronunciation: the greater the students' knowledge of linguistics, the less they value correct pronunciation. Except for this aspect, the results show that neither the regional location of the university nor the number of linguistics units completed by the students impact on the way they perceive the importance of systemic and socio-cultural aspects of foreign language knowledge. Overall, the findings suggest that such aspects of foreign language knowledge are important.

Taken globally, it seems that the students tend to value the communicative function of a foreign language most. This is shown by the higher value they place on the aspects of foreign language knowledge that

more directly concern language production and reception, in particular oral communication.

When the number of linguistics units studied is taken into account, the results seem to indicate that the study of linguistics contributes to the students developing more nuanced views of what underpins foreign language knowledge. Over the course of study of linguistics, formal systemic aspects of foreign language knowledge tended to decline in importance while there was a growing awareness of the importance of socio-cultural aspects and there was little change in the value accorded to aural comprehension, which was systematically highly valued.

This study could provide a basis for further research. Because many of the Chi-square tests were valid (university vs. cultural knowledge; number of linguistics units vs. writing; university vs. having a wide vocabulary; number of linguistics units and university vs. correct pronunciation), both a wider and more balanced sample could be used. In addition, the attitudes and beliefs of the students brought to light by this section of the survey are the product of the values of the practices the students have been exposed to in the educational system and in their private lives. Hence, other independent variables such as the course study plan and its corresponding syllabus could shed further light on what the university students believe or hold as representations of the importance of features underpinning foreign language knowledge.