

## Language Learning And Using Strategies And Their Role In Developing Learners' Autonomy

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**Abstract:** *The paper presents a proposal of increasing the efficiency in learning a foreign language (English) by tertiary education engineering students as a result of implementing a set of language learning and using strategies focused activities in the English for Computer Science course. It is maintained that this is also conducive to enhancing the trainees' further learning autonomy, which is a demand of today's national and international labour market, characterized by permanent changes. Some of the results obtained in an experimental research are presented and discussed in support of this thesis.*

**Key words:** *language learning strategies, language using strategies, communicative competence, strategic competence, autonomy in language learning*

### INTRODUCTION

The main point of departure for this study has been the notion that there have been a lot of changes on the labour market which have generated an increase as far as the responsibility regarding the administration of competencies and of recruitment is concerned; individuals have to learn much more on their own these days, making full use of their background. The roots of this situation are the emergence of the new information technologies, an increase of economic difficulties worldwide, the numerous and diverse expectations in terms of services from the community, the evolution of the labour market and the information boom. Consequently, a teaching/learning/evaluation methodology is necessary that should meet the multiple interests of the students. It should be mainly focused, particularly at university level, on a reconceptualization based on the principle of forming mostly generic competencies, considering the mobility of the graduates, as well as the changing requirements they are exposed to. Higher education should be an arena for self-education and self-instruction, a space reserved to self-awareness and self-formation; fostering the students' self-instruction competence should be, and indeed it has begun to represent, an essential component of the educational policy and practice. Thus, within the educational context described in this paper, viz. the POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest, most of the strategic objectives proposed imply, in an explicit and/or implicit manner, attaining a high communication competence in foreign languages (English, mainly): (1) training specialists in various technical fields, able to make full use of their scientific, technical and humanistic knowledge in order to contribute to the progress of the society; (2) generating a new profile of technical university, which should promote forms of education adapted to the requirements of the competition laws in the society; (3) enlarging the participation in the international exchange of values – by means of collaboration programs with universities all over the world; (4) training engineers able to adapt themselves to the imperatives of the market oriented economy and to the new technologies, and formed by being involved in the choice of their own instructional path, in a learning process that could give them real chances in the free labour market competition.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand our proposal better, it is necessary to revisit the main viewpoints concerning the concepts of: language learning and using strategies, communicative and strategic competences, and learning autonomy – the pillars on which our research has been based. Language Learning Strategies (LLS) are seen as steps and behaviours, often conscientious, used by the learners of a foreign language with a view to amplifying the acquisition, retention, remembering and using of new information [16]. There should be a clear-cut distinction between LLS and Language Use Strategies (LUS), [9]. They are both steps or actions selected by the learners, either with a view to improving their learning quality, or in order to use the language. In terms of categories, there are

differences: thus, LUS include retrieval, rehearsal, cover and communication strategies, mainly. While LLS have as a main purpose providing help to the students in improving their knowledge of the foreign language, LUS are oriented on using the language at interlanguage level, specific to a learner at a certain moment. The main goal of LLS is oriented towards the development of the communicative competence; therefore, they must be conducive to interaction among the learners, which places affective and social strategies as fundamental in an efficient approach to language learning, certainly without disregarding the importance of cognitive and metacognitive ones [16]. Some authors [6] have stressed compensatory strategies in defining strategic competence, viz. those used in order to counterpoise a lack in a certain linguistic area, while for others [1; 2] the notion receives new meanings, being subdivided into four subcomponents: (1) assessment of the communication objectives to be achieved and the necessary linguistic resources; (2) goal-setting, by identifying the activities that must be fulfilled; (3) planning – the relevant linguistic items are found in the own repertoire and their use is planned; and (4) execution – the plan implementation stage. The strategic competence is seen as an ability of selecting an efficient means of fulfilling an act of communication, which gives the listener/reader the possibility to identify the envisaged referent [22]. Another viewpoint maintains that communication strategies can be seen as originating from our strategic competence, by which is meant the way the language is manipulated in order to achieve our purposes in transmitting meaning [4].

It is the teacher's role to identify and make full use of the best ways of enhancing the degree of the students' awareness as regards their own strategic repertory, as many studies point out [15; 16; 17; 20; 21]. The literature also suggests possible relationships between the learners' identified learning styles and their strategic repertoires, respectively [10; 11; 14; 19]. It is a general opinion that these types of relations must be taken into consideration by course designers and teachers at the moment when the ways of supporting the students to identify/develop/refine/use their strategic repertory of LLS and LUS are decided upon. How can this be done in the most effective manner? Many studies recommend that LLS and LUS should be integrated in the normal language curriculum [8; 17; 19]. In [21] an interesting useful remark is made: if the students can be determined to understand the connections between the strategies already used by them and the value of the new ones, prompted/described by the teacher, this can help them to appreciate the benefits resulting from enriching their repertory of strategies. The main aim is to highlight the meanings of the notions of LLS and LUS, so that the learners could correlate these descriptions with their own approach to learning. Moreover, in educational contexts for which there is a high demand in terms of results against the constraint of a very limited time framework for the course – as it is our case – an option as regards the manner in which the students' awareness of their own LLS and LUS repertory can be raised is that of presenting them in both explicit and implicit ways, given the nature of the discipline taught itself, which permits the implementation of such a model. The advisable sequence of phases of the approach, which we also followed in our experimental research, should start from the identification, at first empirical and then by scientific techniques/instruments, of the preferred learning style of each student and of that characterizing the student group as a whole. Then a discussion (by means of explicit speaking activities in English) of the types of LLS and LUS already acquired and preferred, respectively, by the trainees, should be initiated - another opportunity to develop the communicative skills of the students, which is, after all, a main objective of this type of a language course. They should be helped to identify the LLS and LUS they already possess in their own repertory, as well as their strong and not so strong points in language learning, which would finally be conducive to discussing the way LLS and LUS should match the learning style characterizing each student. The teacher should finely mastermind the selections of those LLS and LUS which could enable the trainees to progressively get closer to qualitative learning, with an exploratory character, both active and efficient. This should become a

characteristic of the students' approach to language learning and using, not only at the university course phase, but also in their future activity as graduates facing the challenges of the working context. There are a range of ways and means in achieving this, from the kind of positive classroom atmosphere set or the forms of interaction used, and up to the rapport established by means of the roles assumed by the teacher, or by those the students are encouraged to take on, thus determining them to explicitly get involved in the decision making process with respect to their own learning activity. Such an approach includes: (1) a better level of awareness of their own mid- and long-term needs; (2) a gradual refining of their metacognitive abilities as to their own manner of learning; (3) a flexible selection of the most appropriate LLS and LUS meant to ensure success as efficiently as possible; (4) harmonizing the preferred forms of interaction and of the means and materials used in the learning process with their profile as learners; (5) attempting to turn the process of self-evaluation as objective as possible, even during the learning process itself a.s.o.

Against this framework, a suggested definition of learner autonomy, consisting in becoming aware of, and identifying one's strategies, needs and goals as a learner, and having the opportunity to reconsider and reshape one's own approaches and procedures in order to attain optimal learning [18], confirms that, in the learners-teacher-learning triad, stimulating the students' openness towards getting further independence in achieving qualitative learning has become a must for language teachers. The literature in this domain covers many topics of interest, amongst which the designing and adapting materials that should encourage learner autonomy and the ways of preparing the learners for independence in the study of the language at post-course stages [3]. The students must be so trained as to achieve the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action; autonomous learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning [13]. We should emphasize that learner autonomy should be seen as a dynamic process rather than a static product or a state which can be reached once and for all [7]. We totally agree with the idea that, in order to help trainees to assume greater control over their own learning, it is crucial that teachers should provide them support in becoming aware of, and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use [12].

### **PROPOSAL AND OPEN CONCLUSIONS**

A research program of the ameliorative type was designed and implemented, starting from the need to increase the efficiency of the English language teaching/learning process, with the main purposes of raising the awareness and acquisition level, in a motivated participative manner, of LLS/LUS by the students, and of providing them with the necessary support in becoming able to identify, maximize and/or refine their own strategic repertoire of language learning and using strategies, even after the English course taken in faculty. One hypothesis we wanted to check correlated the extent to which, by introducing and teaching a set of LLS/LUS oriented activities in the ESP course, the learners' awareness level of their optimal LLS/LUS will be reflected in the options made regarding the learning and use of a foreign language at post-course stage - as engineers in the specific professional environment. Similarly, we hypothesized that the more adequate the means adopted by the teacher in teaching LLS/LUS will be, the more the expectations that the trainees' motivation and involvement as well as their readiness in assuming a higher share of responsibility for their learning process may increase. Thus, during the experiment, which lasted for 14 weeks, two course modules were taught in parallel: (1) the experimental module English for Computer Science – ECSexp, comprising the differentiated set of LLS/LUS oriented activities, to the experimental groups, and (2) the current communicative English for Computer Science – ECSwtn one, to the witness groups. The pre-test was the previous term final grade, the post-evaluation was a

comprehensive achievement test; the students' portfolios were used for mid-term progress evaluation.

Code	Question Strategy	Witness		Experimental	
		v. freq./ frequently	rarely/ never	v. freq./ frequently	rarely/ never
20	<i>Setting clear learning objectives</i>	38.37%	43.02%	65.79%	28.95%
21	<i>Identifying/creating opportunities of practising the foreign language</i>	60.47%	20.93%	82.46%	12.28%
22	<b><i>Self-monitoring/evaluating of the progress achieved in learning the foreign language</i></b>	<b>36.05%</b>	<b>45.35%</b>	<b>78.07%</b>	<b>16.67%</b>

**Table 1.** Student Questionnaire – frequency of LLS and LUS use (%)

A selective exemplification of the results obtained using the original research instruments designed and implemented is given in Table 1, which presents some relevant answers to the Student Questionnaire administered at the end of the course. It is obvious that the experimental group was more able to precisely identify their preferred strategies, as well as their own frequency in using them. Particular emphasis should be placed on the answers to Item 22, indicating the extent to which the experiment contributed to helping the experimental students to become more independent in learning. These values should be seen as the premises of their discovering the path to autonomy as learners. As can be noted, the trends are similar for the witness groups. However, the preferences are definitely not so strongly marked, which can make us conclude that they did not attain the same high level of awareness in terms of the strategic repertory they had developed. The same clear preferences of the experimental group were also obtained for several other LLS/LUS items: memorizing by using new words/expressions in a logical context; remembering new information by associating it with a certain mental image; using the foreign language in order to communicate/understand in real situations or in situations simulating reality; fast understanding of the message due to the use of an adequate way of approaching the input text (subskills such as scanning, skimming, listening for gist a.s.o.); deducing meaning in reading/listening by using various linguistic clues, e.g. word order or affixes, as well as non-verbal clues – gestures, tone etc. For the necessary triangulation, experimental students' class diaries, interviews with the students voted as Good Language Learners by their class mates, as well as focus groups were used, all pointing in the same directions as the questionnaire data, e.g. "I have learned how to improve my learning by learning new things about myself"; "In our world today, that keeps changing so fast, it is difficult to know exactly what info will be useful to you in the future, but some things, for instance the way we learn, will always be useful as the use of the correct method will bring you more knowledge than if you just stayed in front of a book"; "It was pretty interesting, so I'm thinking of looking for more learning strategies that may be of help in the future".

As an open conclusion, we can show that the experimental groups students introduced new criteria in analyzing their own learning, becoming willing to assume the effort, most probably as they gradually realized more clearly why English would be useful to them as professionals and that there are various ways of turning the learning process more efficient.

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**Докладът е рецензиран.**