Teaching systematic dictionary use for self-study and confidence building

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Abstract: Twenty-four high-school pupils, boys and girls, aged 13-14, whose MT is Turkish or Pomak, attending the Greek state school in Thrace, participated in this experiment. We investigated whether and to what extent the systematic use of monolingual Greek dictionaries might improve reading comprehension and enrich the pupils' vocabulary. Our aim is to reinforce both their linguistic and strategic competence by encouraging them to use dictionaries for home study. Additionally, we examined their confidence in understanding the meanings of unknown words before and after having been given systematic instruction of dictionary use.
Key words: accuracy, confidence, monolingual dictionaries, Turkish/Greek-speaking bilinguals.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been increasing interest in Teaching Greek as a Second/Foreign Language (GRESEFL) among Muslim Turkish-speaking populations of Thrace. Moreover, many 'frondistiria' (evening schools offering tuition with a standard fee) provide these Muslim children with private tuition in every subject taught in the State school, including the Greek language. The reason these children are now seeking extra help in order to improve their general performance in the Greek-speaking school, (something uncommon ten years ago), is that they seem to have realised, both themselves and their parents, that in this way they will have more chances to succeed in the Higher Education National Exams and gain a place in a prestigious university department, such as Medicine, Engineering, Economics and Law. Such a success will mean a lot to them and their families as it will give them a higher social and economic status and prevent them from being socially excluded.

After 30 years in the area of Thrace and in the educational system, we have many reasons to believe that the main source of their poor performance is their linguistic competence. What should be expected from children who are supposed to be multilingual as they are exposed to more than seven languages, namely Pomak, Turkish, Arabic, Modern and Ancient Greek, English as well as French and/or German? In fact, these are not privileged children as they live in rural areas and language input is not optimal. For these reasons, over the past five years or so we have been investigating several aspects of their linguistic behaviour, focusing on reading comprehension and vocabulary as well as writing, with emphasis on the Greek language, as this is the official language of the country they are expected to study in, and English, as this the most widely preferred foreign language.

2. Teaching and learning vocabulary

2.1 Strategic competence

Within the frame of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980, Canale 1983), Faerch et al (1984) define linguistic and strategic competence.

Strategic competence is normally related to communication strategies, which are activated when the FL speakers want to bridge a gap in communication with their

limited resources, that is when they try to compensate for problems with the use of linguistic or pragmatic knowledge. Nevertheless, Faerch and Kasper (1986) include also learning strategies in their model of strategic competence, as strategic competence should not only be communication related but also learning related. Furthermore, in reading people have to employ what are often referred to as processing strategies (Clark and Clark, 1977), in order to understand a message in the text. These strategies have something in common with communication and learning strategies but they are also different from them in some ways. Therefore, in our model of strategic competence we will include all communication, learning and general processing strategies in reading.

Another issue that should be clarified here is that, unlike Bialystok (1983) and Tarone (1981), we use the term communication strategies for both production and reception complying with Widdowson (1983), who considers capacity at word level the meaning potential of words and covers, among other things, inferencing, negotiating the meaning and problem solving.

To recap, all communication, learning and general processing strategies in reading constitute the strategic competence overall and they share a lot of methods and types of action so as to achieve communication successfully, such as using cues from the surrounding context for inferencing or using a dictionary. Using a dictionary is a very important strategy (Scholfield, 1982a), common in all three components of a person's strategic competence, as we perceive it. That is the reason why, in this particular piece of research, we chose to investigate various parameters involved while learners are making systematic use of it.

2.2 Tackling vocabulary problems in reading comprehension

The different types of strategies FL learners usually employ when tackling unknown vocabulary, have been investigated by many researchers such as Bauer (1980, 1981), Freebody et al (1983) and Hartmann (1982). Such strategies include inferencing, asking the teacher, a NS or peers, even ignoring the word if judged not to be of vital importance to the general comprehension and using a glossary or/and a dictionary. Concerning dictionary use in the teaching/learning environment, a lot of prominent researchers such as Bauer (1980, 1981), who has written analyses and critique of well known and widely used dictionaries, Scholfield (1981, 1982a, 1982b) and Macfarqular et al (1983), who favour the idea of the *'dictionary as a tool in the classroom environment'*, and last but not least Nation (1988). In Greece, a number of researchers such as Αναστασιάδη-Συμεωνίδη (1997), Μήτσης (1999), Γαβριηλίδου (2002), Μάντζαρη (2003), and Νικηφοράκη (2003), to mention but a few, have been investigating the issue recently but the relevant literature is not sufficient yet.

Using a dictionary is a strategy we all have regularly resorted to in every day study. But can we quite safely say that it is a widely-used strategy by any kind of language learners, including all MT and F/SL? Even more so, is the whole process to be taken for granted and as self-evident? We believe not, or only to a lesser extent. By contrast, we have a lot of reservations concerning the development of this strategy in both the NL and FL classroom environment. The reason is that, usually, language teachers do not make a point of actually giving tuition and practice in this specific strategy to their pupils. Consequently, if we really want to make the best of this strategy, we should teach pupils how to use it effectively. If this is the aim for every pupil, it is even more intensively so for the Turkish speaking, Muslim learners as social, cultural and economic reasons make dictionary use even more remote for them than for their Christian peers (this is politically incorrect since it is based on religion).

2.3 Dictionary use as a factor for accuracy and confidence

Among other researchers, Scholfield (1982b) holds that efficient use of a dictionary to find the meaning of words in a passage for comprehension presupposes that the learner has already gathered some information about the word from the context. This information will probably include the part of speech the word belongs to, its immediate or remote context, morphological cues, prior knowledge of the subject etc. Step (iii) of the seven-step strategy suggested by Scholfield is adjusted to the principles of recent Interdisciplinary Methodology (Διαθεματικό Πλαίσιο Ενιαίων Προγραμμάτων Σπουδών, 2001), used in certain minority schools of Thrace and the children may be familiar with it. In the specific step, the children could be introduced to the use of algorithms by the teacher of mathematics.

(i)   Locate the word(s) or phrase you don't understand
(ii)   If the unknown word is inflected, remove the inflection to find the lexeme; especially difficult for Greek as a foreign language.
(iii) Search for the unknown word in the alphabetical list-a time consuming process as the children have difficulty in finding the correct order. However, we can make the most of it by having the teacher of Mathematics explain to them the use of algorithms, within the frame of interdisciplinary theory.
(iv)   If you can't find at least one main entry for the unknown word, try looking in the addendum, look at nearby entries just in case the unknown word might have irregular form, look up parts of the word.
(v)   If there are several senses or homographic entries, reduce them by elimination.
(vi)   Try to understand the definition and integrate it into the context where the unknown word was met.
(vii) If none of the senses or entries seems to fit, attempt to infer the target meaning from the senses you have. If more than one fits, see further context cues in the passage to help you choose.

What we should keep in mind is that, as Scholfield suggests, we should always refer to context till the final step and try to infer meaning from it. It also has to be pointed out that this method has been systematically followed since 2000, in the Schools of Second Chance, a pioneering type of state school, especially designed for mature deserters and so far the results seem to be very encouraging, as it is described in a series of papers (Καμπάκη - Λυγερός, 2005), on which, part of this research was based.

Another interesting issue concerning dictionary use is how it affects users' confidence that they have made the right guess. In a series of experiments conducted with Greek learners of English (Kambakis, 1992a and b) and child speakers of GREFL, from ex-USSR (Kambakis, 2001 and 2002), the confidence factor and whether it affects accuracy in a series of inference tests was introduced. Confidence is an important issue as we strongly believe that it facilitates the learning process. The analysis of every single experiment showed that confidence affects accuracy statistically significantly. The first time we investigated the confidence factor in dictionary use was in an experiment conducted in Athens (Καμπάκη-Βουγιουκλή 2006) with very interesting results from six (6) learners-speakers of Turkish, who appeared more confident using words they had learnt from or had found in a dictionary, after having received systematic instruction on dictionary use. This might be due to the fact that they saw their accuracy levels rise which, in turn, boosted their confidence; yet the issue needs further investigation since prominent researchers such as Bensoussan and Laufer (1984) claim that there was no significant difference in accuracy before and after dictionary

use. Therefore, we went on to investigate our hypotheses further with a longitudinal study involving sufficient numbers of subjects to ensure greater reliability of the results.

3. The research
3.1 Hypotheses
We claim that the systematic instruction and practice in using dictionaries will have beneficial effect initially on the learners' capacity to understand what they read and later on their written and oral performance. We also claim that after they have consolidated this strategy, their confidence will be boosted and they will be more self-dependent in their study.

3.2 Method
3.2.1 Subjects
Our study started in September 2004. First we handed out 105 questionnaires to pupils, all attending the same 'frondistirion' and considered to belong to the target group. The questions included information such as age, gender, socioeconomic and educational status of the parents, i.e. whether or not they speak Greek, whether the learners attend the Greek State School or the minority School, whether or not they use dictionaries and if so which one, whether they use them for comprehension, production or both and what marks they had achieved. We took back 73 complete questionnaires and from those we chose twenty-four pupils, aged 13-14, equally divided into boys and girls, who participated in the experiment.

3.2.2 Design
Twelve children, six boys and six girls, constitute the experimental group and the other twelve, of similar background, the control group, who had no instruction at all. There was a mixing of the groups so that there would be children who used dictionaries and children who did not in both the experimental and the control group. Furthermore, the previous year's mark for Greek, in all children ranged from 12/20 to 14/20.

3.2.3 Materials and tasks
Once a week during the period of the application, the researcher and the three teachers met and chose an authentic passage of gradual difficulty, consisting of about 150 words. The passages were taken from local newspapers to ensure some familiarity with the issues as the learners' families are interested in (un)employment, crops and weather conditions, which are common topics in local newspapers. This ensured that there was some kind of shared pragmatic knowledge and personal differences were reduced. We discussed to what extent those words we considered potentially problematic would be judged to be so by the learners, too. This whole process was time-consuming for the teachers but, hopefully, rewarding in the long run. We prepared as many handouts as the learners and transparencies for the overhead projector. The teachers had underlined the problematic areas on their own copies but not on the learners' or the transparency in order to check whether they would focus on the same points. Not many surprises were identified, that is teachers and learners spotted the same unknown words in the texts.

Concerning the use of dictionaries, the learners who had and used one were asked to bring it with them; there were also learners who had to borrow dictionaries from us as they did not own one. We provided them with Μπαμπινιώτης, 1998 (ΛΝΕΓ) and Τριανταφυλλίδης, 1999 (ΛΚΝ) for two reasons: (a) from their answers in the questionnaire, they did not seem to be familiar with the actual dictionaries, and (b) we

think that it would be very useful for the learners to get acquainted with the most recent lexicographic work in modern Greek.

3.2.4 Procedure

The experiment was conducted at two stages: Part I was conducted for five weeks, from mid-October 2004 to end of November 2004 and Part II for four weeks in March and April 2004. We met twice a week, for 90 minutes each session and all the tasks had to be completed within that time. This means that we devoted four teaching hours for 9 weeks, i.e. a total of 36 hours. However, it has to be mentioned here that the children actually received more instruction, namely 32 hours more, as they also participated in an English language experiment we also conducted at the time, in parallel with the Greek one, the results of which will be presented in the future.

3.2.5 Scoring of accuracy and confidence

We adopted the following way for the assessment of the data on accuracy: 3 for a 'correct' answer, 2 for 'satisfactory', 1 for 'satisfactory enough' and 0 for 'not satisfactory'. As for confidence: 3 = I am absolutely sure, 2 = I am reasonably sure, 1= I am rather unsure, 0 = I am extremely unsure

4. Results-discussion

4.1 Part I of the experiment

We launched the fist part of our research by arranging the first meeting at the 'frondistirion' which subjects attended. Three teachers of Greek, all working on the premises and teachers of the participants acted as models. More specifically, they projected the paragraph on the overhead projector and they read the passage two or three times. The teachers and the twelve participants identified the unknown words discussing them with each other and underlined them in their handouts and the transparencies. Then the teachers started acting as if they were learners trying to decode them, mainly using inference. Meanwhile the children started to suggest their own guesses and they seemed to enjoy it.

In the second part of the process, during the last 30 minutes, the teachers introduced the dictionary (a) to confirm the meanings of the words they had guessed and (b) to look up the ones they had not managed to guess. Again, in this process they thoroughly followed the steps in the Scholfield model: For example, our first passage was a local paper report about an adventurous meeting of the Town Council after the disaster caused by torrents of rain due to damages in the drainage works of the town that had not been taken care of on time. The «αποδοκιμάστηκε» in the title of the article «Αποδοκιμάστηκε ο δήμαρχος μετά τη νεροποντή» (roughly meaning that the mayor was disapproved of after the rain) was difficult to infer as it was vague. Although the learners were encouraged to read the actual article, they still could not make it out, because the word was not repeated anywhere. Consequently, they had no choice but to look the word up in the dictionary. The word was rather difficult to find because of the passive suffix and the derived morphology. It was at this very early stage that we found out that learners had difficulty in applying the algorithm, they had to recite the alphabet aloud and start all over again in order to find which letter is next. As for their attitude towards the task, some of the learners found it fascinating, others seemed bored. The whole procedure was tape-recorded and given to the learners to listen to it at home, although the quality was not very good because of the voices but we wanted to prepare them for future action. The same process was applied the following week with the teachers acting as models and the learners mainly watching and participating every now

and then. It was at this point that the teacher of Mathematics was asked to introduce algorithms; however, as the time was pressing us and the place where the experiment was taking place was a frondistirion rather than a state school, this step was left incomplete and cannot be evaluated properly. The whole procedure took two weeks in total.

In the third week the learners were told that they would be divided into pairs, one member of which would act as Sherlock Holms and the other as Dr Watson. We explained who Holms and Watson were to a couple of learners who had not heard of them before. We projected the passage on the screen, had them read it aloud, decide on the words they did not know, underline and number them and asked the learners to work in pairs in order to decode the information acting as if they were good detectives trying to solve a mystery. This approach seems to have got even the previously uninterested learners, engaged in the activity. We also asked them to work silently, so as not to be overheard by others, and have their findings revealed. They all had to use inference and prior knowledge at the first stage, but not a dictionary as yet. After they had reached a guess they were asked to specify their confidence in it, each learner separately, on the four-grade scale provided at the bottom of the handouts. Finally, we asked one pair to explain how they had reached each guess and we recorded them. These protocols are of great interest and constitute a separate subject for research as it shows the way word meanings are worked out sometimes thinking and speaking in Turkish and/or Pomak, their mother tongues.

The next step was to use dictionaries ; they were warned not to forget to check if the guess they made was appropriate for the context. Finally, they were asked again to estimate their confidence on the second scale provided at the bottom of the page. This time they had to re-estimate their guesses before dictionary use by specifying their confidence again on the four-grade scale. The same process took place the following week with a different passage.

In week 5 and the day before the final session, the twelve pupils of the control group were also invited in a separate classroom and were given hourly instruction so that they would be able to participate in the final experiment with the experimental group. The following day the pupils of both groups worked together.

4.2 Part II of the experiment

In mid-March we gathered again and we applied the following process for three weeks.

This time we divided the experimental group in two sub-groups of three pairs of children, a total of six children per group. We gave them the passage and we allowed one group to use the dictionary and the other not to. We also told them that they had to compete with the other group in speed and accuracy of responses. They were again asked to specify their confidence on a four-grade scale as in Part I of the experiment. During the last session we also invited the twelve children of the control group, divided them into two subgroups of three pairs each, and we followed exactly the same procedure as in Part I. Again the results indicate significant differences prima vista as the MANOVA test has not been completed yet.

Concerning confidence, we noticed that the control group were either over-confident or under- confident while the experimental group showed some kind of balance.

As for accuracy, both groups which used a dictionary achieved better guesses but the experimental group went for better options from the information available in the dictionary. In other words, the control group usually found 'satisfactory' answers, within the wider semantic field of a word, while the experimental group had more

responses characterized by 'complete accuracy', i.e. they went for the best choice for the specific case.

Therefore, although they both finished the tests and they got the general idea of the passage, the experimental group responded better. This might explain the fact that Bensoussan et al (1984) do not see any significant difference in accuracy levels between inference and dictionary use.

There are some other interesting parameters that emerged from the analysis such as which dictionaries proved to be more effective, differences between boys and girls in accuracy and confidence and whether the subjects' mother tongue (Turkish or Pomak) plays a role – it seems it does; nevertheless as the space is not enough they will be presented in a next paper, after the MANOVA is completed.

Finally, if performance in the State School might indicate something, the twelve children from the experimental group got an average 14-15/20 in Greek and one got 16/20 while most of the children in the control group remained between 12 and 14/20. Certainly the 70 hours of extra tuition., the information about reading and vocabulary on one hand, and guidance on dictionary use on the other, must have played an important role in learners' performance. Our research is still ongoing.

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