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Investigating learning difficulties at Romanian language and literature subject in perspective of learning to learn competence development

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Abstract

Learning how to learn can be particularly difficult for students with learning difficulties. Each student may encounter certain problems at one or more school subjects in a certain time, problems that seem to be insurmountable and may become constant throughout schooling. This study investigates the frequencies of students' learning difficulties from 5-12th grades on the cognitive, metacognitive and non-cognitive dimensions in Romanian language and literature subject. Participants in the study were 81 Romanian language and literature teachers from Cluj county, who were asked about the students' learning difficulties in order to design modalities to overcome them.

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Keywords: learning difficulties; learning to learn competence; metacognitive strategies.

1. Paper Rationale

The learning to learn competence has been identified in several contexts as one of the key competencies for success in the knowledge society (European Council, 2006). Education and instruction should provide learning environment to develop these competencies for all citizens, including those with fewer opportunities (those with special needs, dropouts etc.) and different learning environments (formal, non-formal and informal). The idea of

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teaching the student to study, so that he reaches as little as possible dependency on external control and capability of self-teaching, imposed in specialized literature concepts such as autonomous learning, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, learning style etc. To achieve the goal of „learning to learn” in recent years, it has been proved to be particularly effective training students in the purchase and appropriate use of cognitive learning strategies, including to highlight the orientation to self-learning and development of metacognitive, socio-emotional and motivational skills.

The theme of the study is part of a current and complex issue, with interdisciplinary valence, the one of development of learning to learn competence for students with learning difficulties that may occur in different forms: behavioral disorders, learning and adaptation disabilities, emotional difficulties etc. Even if this investigative approach is without an obvious solution to all school difficulties, we find out that we are often confronted with students who have learning difficulties because they do not know effective learning strategies. Or, students first come to school to learn. Thus, we don't find it surprising that their school failure often comes from an inability to learn and use their intellectual resources effectively. „Learning to learn” should become a reality in our schools for all students. They would develop a competence of the utmost importance for the future, that of knowing how to dial throughout life using their intellectual resources.

The discipline Romanian language and literature has a central role in shaping the personality of the students, the formation of skills and abilities necessary to meet the demands of a society based on profound changes and on emphasizing the need to achieve a lifelong learning. During school, students must form their communication competences necessary to perform any activities in society, but also the ability to learn to learn. Are thus formed and developed correct, clear and coherent speech skills, competences to understand and produce oral and written messages in various communication situations and the skills for learning management, planning capacity, monitoring and control of learning strategies and metacognitive reflection.

Our paper aims to be the result of a theoretical and methodological effort research whose premises will become a starting point to formulate guidelines of the design activity for improving student learning activity.

2. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

Introducing the term „competence” in educational systems demonstrates their sensitivity to the dominant socio-economic ideas. On the other hand, the frequent use of the word „competence” in the education world is given with the requirement of increasing the individual autonomy, which is constantly under evaluation. It is recognized that the term „competence” knows a major success. Competence-based education is a learning process centered around the ability and the responsibility of each student and the development of autonomy and self-confidence. Briefly, it is a teaching and learning system focused on student in exchange for the previous teacher centered system.

In Romania, the system of key-competences has been an reference element of the curricula and included as such in their foundation note, which considers that curricular areas are compatible with the 8 key areas of competence established at European level. The learning to learn competence is also present in many school programs, but teachers and schools need more support to systematically include this competence in teaching and learning. Innovative methods such as research-based learning, personal reflection based learning, may be particularly useful for people who have had previous negative experiences in school or were marked by failure. In the interactive instruction is considered that an approach is effective when it permits „integration of active, interactive and coherent of different types of knowledge (savoir, cognitive savoir-faire, practical savoir, savoir-être and savoir-devenir), when they don't favor fragmentation of knowledge, but rather stimulate and encourage connections, interrelations and purchases transfer”. (Bocoş, M.-D., 2013)

In the study of Romanian language and literature cannot be ignored certain fields covering competences, knowledge and attitudes of transversal type, that this discipline is considering by default. Thus, under the new National Curriculum Framework Reference (apud Potolea, D., Toma, S., Borzea, A., 2012), general competence no. 4. „The use of effective instruments for lifelong learning” directly contributes to the formation and development of general competences of Romanian language and literature discipline.

Learning difficulties are presented as a part of the determining factors of school failure. (Gherguţ, A., 2005; Cocoradă, E., 2009) As cited by Queensland Studies Authority (2007, apud Westwood, P., 2008), learning difficulties are about „the barriers which limits the access and the participation to the results obtained by

curriculum”. The term „learning difficulties” is a general one, very generous, often used loosely and without much precision. The scope and definition of this concept continues to be very controversial. Students who don't have specific learning difficulties, but are slower, less strategic, generalize less knowledge and have more difficulties to connect tasks: this will be a consequence of the fact they don't transfer learning strategies. (Bosson, M., 2010 apud Vianin, P., 2011) Some researchers (Borkowski and al., 2000), also sustain that this lack of transfer has an explanation at a motivational level which is low for this students.

The idea of deficit (Peterson, J.M., Hittie, M.M., 2010 apud Westwood, P., 2011) emphasizes at least, that there are certain difficulties areas, which have to be considered in projecting and conducting school activities. Rather than focusing exclusively on deficits, it is usually more efficient to investigate factors outside the student, as quality and type of education, teachers expectations, curriculum relevancy, class environment, interpersonal dynamics inside the group and relationship with teacher. These factors are more likely to be modified than internal students factors or from his culture and family. The attempt to identify best ways to help a student with learning difficulties implies finding the most significant factors, which has to be approached, offering to students a high level education. This type of teaching usually implies a clear presentation of information, abilities and strategies by the teacher, explicit teaching, direct, active engagement of students, practice guided with feedback, independent practice and frequent revisions. (Bellert, A., 2009; Wendling, B.J., Mather, N., 2009 apud Westwood, P., 2011)

Students' reading comprehension difficulties can be attributed to different factors. Sometimes the difficulties are caused by a lack of fluency in the recognition of keywords. However, many students face difficulties in understanding what they read, despite oral reading fluency due to cognitive processing problems, including the limitations of working memory, lexical processing deficits, making inappropriate inferences and monitoring weak understanding. Other reasons may include a limited vocabulary, difficult participation in explaining meanings of the text, identifying main ideas and the lack of connection of new information with previously known facts. Specialized studies (Weinfeld, R., Barnes-Robinson, L., Jeweler, S., Roffman Shevitz, B., 2006, Winebrenner, S., 2006) and our teaching experience notices the existence of a particular group of children which appear to be regular students, but their average level of performance is due to reduced learning abilities, hiding their learning difficulties. This category of students is difficult to identify. For this reason, our educational intervention on learning difficulties takes place in the this category of population, students with learning disabilities which benefit from support educational programs. In the present research, learning difficulties are investigated distinctly from mental deficiencies, characterizing children in the sphere of „normality”, normality understood as being associated with an IQ at or above medium liminal zone.

In education, the interest on learning strategies has increased with the idea of competences, in fact, strategies are considered part of the resources that the student must engage in the exercise of his competences. (Peters and Viola, 2003 Tardif, 2006). Terms as learning strategies, teaching strategies, strategic learning are widely used to suggest that students can choose specific procedures to carry out certain tasks. These strategies can help students improve their reading, writing, math and problem-solving performance. Based on work in cognitive psychology, strategies are defined as learning techniques, problem-solving behaviors or study skills that make learning more efficient and effective (Oxford, R. Crookall, D., 1989 apud Fenfang, L., 2010). We say that it is strategic learning when the learner is aware of the learning process and controls his efforts on the use of specific skills and strategies. These characteristics of learning are well defined by the concept of strategic learning. (Paris, Lipson and Mixson, 1983 apud Vianin, P., 2011) According to Butler (1998), strategic learning involves „a recursive cycle of cognitive activities, including tasks analyze, selection, adaptation or invention of strategies, monitoring performance as well as changing approaches that are needed”. Therefore, effective strategic learning should promote all these activities, cognitive, as well as motivational and emotional processes. Closely related to strategic learning, strategic teaching favors the acquisition by students of both declarative knowledge, as well as the strategic and procedural knowledge, the last two assuming reaching higher taxonomic levels of thinking and encouraging gaining autonomy in learning. Strategic teaching shapes „learning strategies adopted by students and high intrinsic motivation strategies for acquiring a progressively more complex knowledge.” (Bocoş, M., Stan, C., Manea, A.D, 2008).

Research shows that students who report more self-regulated learning strategies perform better in school learning (Boekaerts, M., Corno, L., 2005). Research on this subject are now very numerous and show that students with learning difficulties often have failures, since they do not know good strategies. They present cognitive and

metacognitive inadequate strategies and are trying to compensate for difficulties overusing the ones they are most familiar (Saint-Laurent and al., 1995 apud Vianin, P., 2011). Even if the student knows how to use an effective strategy, it may not be motivated to use it. Some researchers (e.g. Paris, 1988) describe the two major components of learning or as ability (ie. learning strategies) or as desire (e.g. motivation to use learning strategies). Limited use of the strategy and the lack of transfer of strategies to new situations are important characteristics of students with learning difficulties. (Fuchs and al., 2003; Wong, 1994) Pressley and Levin (1987) showed that these students not only use less learning strategies than successful students, but they often use these ineffective. Indeed, the effective use of the strategy requires a certain degree of metacognitive knowledge (Björklund, 2005), which are the strategies of the student's repertoire and in what situations should be applied. Thus, metacognition plays an important role in learning.

According to the concept of author E. Cocoradă (2009), metacognition stimulates learning through „increase of student activism, through the use of their differences, but also forms the autonomy offering the advantage to control and conduct the learning approach.” It promotes the transfer of information and procedures, setting fastest effective strategies, allows learning to continue and provides resources for new learnings. Metacognitive activities are conducted, most often automated so that they are not made aware. For this reason, a number of authors (L. Lafortune, L. Saint-Pierre, etc.) emphasize the fact that students must be helped by the professor to acquire skills and metacognitive awareness, learn to know their own thoughts, to control information processing capacity, to become aware of the thinking strategies, to monitor the effectiveness of strategies and self-evaluation their progress. In other words, metacognition should be the subject to an explicit intentional learning and not as it is in this moment left to an implicit incidental learning.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the explorative study described in the present paper was to investigate the present situation in the educational reality, regarding the general opinion of the Romanian language and literature teachers related to the frequency manifestation of learning difficulties as well as the possibilities of their optimization in relation to specific educational practices that support learners practice the learning autonomy. The sample of subjects of the research is represented by 81 professors who teach Romanian language and literature discipline in Cluj county. Since it is very difficult to investigate only in one research, a whole variety of learning difficulties that appear in the study of all disciplines, we considered only the typical manifestations of learning difficulties of cognitive, metacognitive and non-cognitive dimensions faced by students at Romanian language and literature discipline, especially the students of XI classes. Romanian Language and Literature is a fundamental discipline in the National Curriculum, in the curriculum area „Language and Communication” having compulsory study status and evidence of entry at the end of XII grade.

The investigation with ascertaining purpose was structured as a questionnaire-based survey. The Questionnaire for teachers of Romanian language and literature was designed by us for Romanian language and literature teachers who responded online on website www.isondaje.ro. The questionnaire was designed to capture mainly, the following key issues: induced types of problems encountered in students learning, the frequency of learning behaviors related to cognitive, metacognitive and non-cognitive dimensions, identification of learning difficulties common to students in XI grade and ways of overcoming them, the opportunity of carrying out intervention programs for developing the learning to learn competence.

Learning behaviors related to cognitive, metacognitive and non-cognitive dimensions are identified as a consequence of operational learning strategies derived from research regarding processing information, strategies contained in O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomy (1990) who propose a scheme based on three major categories of learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective strategies to which we have added resources management and motivational strategies from Zimmerman research (1986). The questionnaire includes eight items as closed questions, to which the answer was to achieve appreciation and frequencies on a Likert scale from 1-5, as well as a free-response questions.

4. Results

We chose to investigate learning difficulties in the Romanian language and literature because we considered that the development of the learning to learn competence in this subject is of a particular importance, since reducing, mitigating the difficulties effects experienced by students towards learning lead implicitly to a reduction of the difficulties effects at other disciplines also. On the other hand, the development of the ability to analyze their own learning, skills acquisition, selection, application, transfer, decision making, evaluation of learning strategies, critical and metacognitive reflection skills, a good communication, a proper perception and free expression, nuanced, expressive are competences that cannot be formed only through a prolonged expression during activities at the subject Romanian language and literature.

Asked which is the general opinion regarding learning outcomes at students they teach, respondents had different opinions. Thus, if a share of 35.8% of them stated that the opinion is very good and good, a rate of 34.5% stated that their opinion is no good or no good at all. At the same time, the remaining respondents, approximately 30% said that they had an intermediate opinion, perception about learning outcomes not being very well defined.

The problem of induced learning difficulties is operationalized in the questionnaire by their intrinsic and extrinsic nature at several dimensions, from aspects pertaining to themselves, to aspects related to quality of teaching and the relationship with the family, in the opinion of the authors D. Ungureanu (1998) and A. Gherguț (2005). We select below the most significant results obtained from the survey applied to Romanian language and literature teachers. Thus, a significant percentage of teachers (33.3% largely and 17.3% heavily) believe that students lack strategies for learning aspect reflected in the learning difficulties. A very low percentage of respondents (16% in a small extent and 2.5% at all) states that students do not lack learning strategies as shown in the data interpreted statistically. Also, a percentage of 37% (largely) and 12.3% (heavily) of teachers believe that student disinterest towards learning activity generates their school difficulties. We notice a small percentage (19.8% in small measure and 8.6% at all) of teachers who believe that students are motivated to learn, that show interest to their main business as a students. We also note that a large percentage of Romanian language teachers involved in observational research, consider precarious previous experience is among learning difficulties to a large extent (40.7%). From the answers of the majority of teachers (43.2% and 17.3%) results that a weak teaching affects students' learning difficulties in a small extent or not at all. However, there is a percentage of Romanian language teachers (11.1%) who recognize that a weak teaching generates learning difficulties at a large and very large extent, requiring as measure teachers continuous improvement, curricular adaptation to students with learning difficulties requirements.

Following the opinion of Romanian language and literature teachers regarding the frequency of manifestation of learning behaviors reported to the cognitive dimension, the responses most statistically significant are as follows: use of reference materials (50.6%) of the type dictionaries, resources web, textbooks, notes, collections etc. is a learning behavior with rare/never frequency. Similarly, the use of materials in everyday life (48.1%) is a rare frequency behavior, which requires in our opinion raising teachers interest to form students transferable competences, to encourage the application of information in real living, in non-formal and informal education contexts.

Aiming at following Romanian language teacher opinion regarding the rare frequency of learning behaviors manifestation related to the metacognitive dimension, from the analyzed data it appears that exposure of personal goals and selecting appropriate strategies meets the highest share (74.1%), followed by place two reflection of the degree of assimilation of the material (64.2%), and then verification and correction of a fact understanding or a task performance adjustment (56.7%).

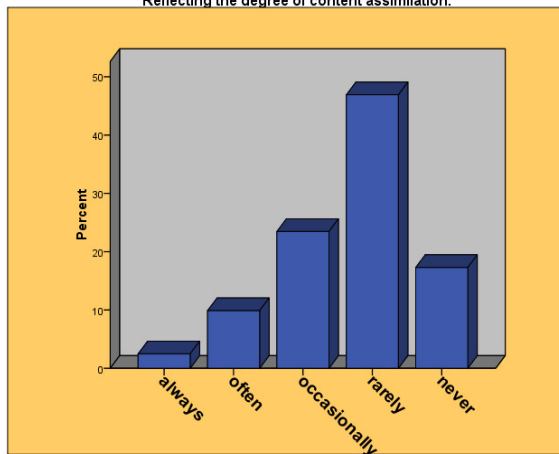


Fig. 1. Teachers opinion on reflecting the degree of content assimilation

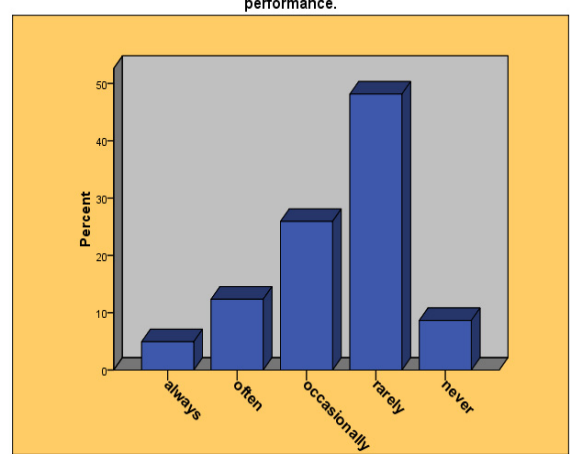


Fig. 2. Teachers opinion on checking and correcting of a fact understanding or adjusting a task performance

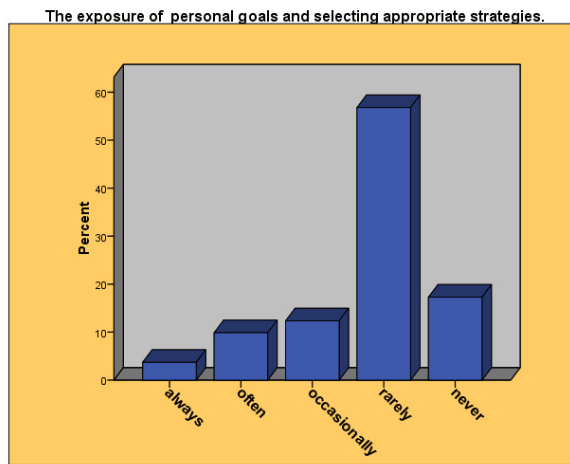


Fig. 3. Teachers opinion regarding the exposure of personal goals and selecting appropriate strategies

In the analysis of the results obtained for learning behaviors related to the non-cognitive dimension, Romanian language and literature teachers consider necessary to place on top emotional self-monitoring practices such as „hearing” his body - emotional body reactions, the use of checklists, writing a journal, discussing feelings (56.8%) as well as anxiety control and the use of stress reduction techniques (51.8%). The rare frequency of these behaviors slightly above average indicate the need of explicit students involvement in activities that require more focused exploitation of these practices in terms of developing their emotional self-regulation, their own self-regulated learning. It is well known that students with learning difficulties are predisposed to failure and maladjustment, especially to violence and indiscipline, show evident emotional reactions, observable in behavior.

Most answers have put learning difficulties common in eleventh grade students in relation to the lack of verification of understanding level of a text (I rank), low capacity argument, explanation, deepening reading materials (II rank), difficulties in the organization, structuring the material, the information presented in texts (III rank), low learning motivation, disinterest towards the subjects taught (IV rank), a limited vocabulary, difficult participation in explaining meanings of the text, identifying main ideas and lack of connection of new information to previously known facts etc.

Positioning in hierarchical order, by frequency, ways to overcome learning difficulties that teachers stated that students from XI grade have, emphasizes again focus on the learning cognitive dimension, the metacognitive one remaining secondary: the use of interactive teaching and learning methods (debates, examples, case studies, films etc.), repeated and thorough text reading, practice skills of information organizing (highlights, notes, keywords etc.), creating situations in which students give reasons, think, a different approach, personalized learning tasks, individual study, creating learning situations that require students' prior experiences, explicit teaching of cognitive strategies sets, organizing in collaboration activities, creating self-assessment situations, encouraging, stimulating motivation, parental involvement.

Also, the survey results show that more than 95% of those surveyed considered that this competence is very important and important. We meet the same result when teachers are asked to express their level of acceptance if it took place an intervention program for developing these skills.

5. Discussions

An initial idea that emerges from the analysis performed among Romanian language and literature teachers is, that in this case, we can say that the most common learning difficulties at cognitive, meta-cognitive and non-cognitive level for students of XI grade focuses on the metacognition area, strategies for planning, monitoring, metacognitive evaluation, however, a possible intervention will be taken into account the three interrelated dimensions. This statement draws attention on students' involvement through coherent pedagogical interventions on covering of various learning situations and gaining cognitive and metacognitive experiences which enable the student to overcome his learning difficulties and perform important transfers to new learning situations.

Data obtained from the responses Romanian language and literature teachers reveals that the cognitive dimension of learning behavior is better represented quantitatively and with the most frequent manifestation, as evidence of the student profile that knows how to learn, and metacognitive as well as non-cognitive dimension (motivational, socio-affective) are poorly acknowledged. To develop the competence learning to learn, Romanian language and literature teachers emphasized the need to create educational intervention formative learning opportunities, practice reflective and strategic capacities, direct their own learning, knowledge and understanding of strategies learning, making decisions about their use. To use effective learning strategies, students need metacognitive knowledge, need to understand which strategies are suited to be applied in various learning tasks and in what circumstances.

Stimulating metacognition is reflected in the choice and the proposal for learning tasks that incite, invite, facilitates questions (tasks that offer open searches, solving complex problems, proposing attempts, challenges), any activity that requires the students, especially those with learning difficulties the opportunity to analyze, in a reflexive manner, their own actions. These activities that invite to reflection provides the student with learning difficulties, strategic solutions and resolution, but also opportunities to ask about the effectiveness of the work, about the involvement, application of cognitive activities, the extent to which the proposed tasks were solved, about further optimized and improved resolute possibilities and strategies, necessary to involvement in a new task. Students need reflection, meditation to realize what they are capable in learning process. By helping them to wonder about how to work, to solve various tasks, to use learning strategies, how to interact with others, the teacher motivates them to overcome the spontaneous discoveries and findings, guiding them to a higher level, the awareness of what they learn and how they learn. But for students, especially those with learning difficulties, it is difficult to reach a higher level of reflection, questioning, metacognition, without an explicit model. Therefore, the role of the teacher in leading, guiding student learning activity must be coupled with exercising new competences, those of reflective teacher. The teacher must provide the student a model for reflection and action on tasks.

Another idea that emerges from the analysis of Romanian language and literature teachers responses, on students' learning difficulties in XI grade is that, although there are signs of the availability of teachers to optimize their teaching, development of learning management competences such as learning autonomy, development of capacity to decide or information processing capacity should be at the forefront of teachers concerns. From these results derives the urgent need to develop an educational strategy with compensatory purpose which should aim precisely at the points made above, respectively educational intervention programs that build student self-regulation skills, which

should cause and support students to take awareness and metacognitive regulation of learning, develop planning metacognitive strategies, setting your own learning goals, self-monitoring and self-evaluation strategies.

Conclusions

Teachers concern to remedy learning difficulties by stimulating metacognition, practice critical and reflective skills, choice behaviors of the most effective strategies reveals the need to design intervention programs to cultivate student responsibility for their own learning, to determine the student to take an active role in learning process, to stimulate deep processing of information and self-reflective capacities, abilities to make optimal decisions about the efficiency of learning strategies.

In conclusion, the learning to learn competence consists in obtaining, processing and assimilating new knowledge, skills and abilities, but also searching for guidance and counseling. Learning to learn requires the involvement of learners in knowledge construction, starting from their life experience and their previous skills, in order to be able to apply knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts.

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