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Multilingual learning for specific purposes: identifying language strategies, awareness and preferences

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Abstract

Interest in multilingual learning provided the stimulus for conducting the study with the aim to provide an account of LSP students' awareness in strategy employment in English as a first foreign language (FL1) and German as a second foreign language (FL2). The findings revealed a satisfactory degree of students' strategic awareness both in FL1 and FL2. It is suggested that the students could benefit from multilingual instruction to enhance their awareness in multilingual competence and metacognitive strategic use in as many foreign languages as possible.

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Keywords: multilingual learning, strategic awareness, learning preferences, multilingual competence;

1. Introduction

The increased interest and growth of research into multilingualism identified over the last ten years has led to the development of the field into a new discipline (Kemp, 2009, p.11) following the general trend that for the larger part of the world population some form of multilingualism tends to be the norm (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2004). In an attempt to conceptualize multilingual competence, Cenoz and Genesee (1998, p.17) suggest that it can be described as the capacity of individuals "to use several languages appropriately and effectively for communication in oral and written language" however, they contend that such definition can be regarded as "overly simplistic". It is acknowledged that identifying what level of proficiency needs to be attained for an individual to have acquired multilingual competence, or possess adequate knowledge of a second or third foreign language is highly debated (Saville-Troike, 2006, p.30).

In addition, as multilingual users are expected to use different languages in various situations for different purposes they may need to make use of all the components or aspects of communicative competence, however, it is often case that they do not imperatively develop all competencies in each one of these languages to the same extent or level (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998, p.19). Therefore, successful foreign language learning presupposes the ability to make appropriate selection and use from a strategy repertoire (Chamot et al, 1988; Green & Oxford 1995). Appropriate language learning strategies are tools which are believed to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence (Oxford, 1990).

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A number of variables, such as language proficiency, age, gender, as well as individual styles, cultural differences and learning stage have been shown to affect the type and frequency of the strategies employed by either L2/FL learners (Green & Oxford 1995; Griva et al, 2009; Psaltou-Joycey, 2008 among others).

Since language learning is primarily regarded a learner- and learning-oriented activity (Brown, 2002; Wright, 1991) the centrality of the learners' role in the process of FL language learning has been largely emphasized. In effect, the learners' beliefs about the language learning process are considered a significant variable (Borich & Tombari, 1997). In fact, the learners' preferences about the learning process are "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts to master a foreign language" (Rifkin, 2000, p.394). It is thought that personal reflection on how one acquires language could serve as a key to mastering a foreign language.

2. The Study

2.1 Purpose

The study, which is a part of a broader research project, was conducted with the aim to provide an account of LSP students' awareness in employing cognitive, memory and metacognitive strategies in English as a first foreign language (FL1) and German as a second foreign language (FL2) as well as their preferences for aspects of FL1 and FL2 learning. Independent variables such as gender, FL1 and FL2 level, and year of study were examined.

2.2. Context and sample of the study

The Organization for Vocational Education and Training (OVET), a Legal Entity of Public Law, was established in the framework of the National System for Vocational Education and Training (ESEEK), Law 2009/1992 under the aegis of the Ministry of Education following the changing needs of the labour market at both the national and the local levels in Greece. Today there are about 100 Public Vocational Institutes providing 180 specializations (www.oEEK.gr). Training takes place for two years, during which the teaching of English has been included on the timetable for three hours every week.

The participants involved in the study were 405 students (216 male and 189 female students) of State Vocational Training Institutes in Northern Greece. 224 of them attended the first year and 171 the second year of study. All participants have been attending English as a foreign language in the Training Institutes and 65.4% declared that they can speak German as a second foreign language (FL2).

2.3. Research Instrument

A self-report questionnaire was administered to the students to fill in during an hourly session, which consisted of three basic sections: a) the first section was related to 'student profile', b) the second section, consisting of 17 closed questions/statements, asked students to indicate the degree of their preference in learning strategies on a 3-point scale (much, moderately, little), b) the third section, consisting of 14 nominal questions, asked students to mark 'yes' or 'no' on their 'preferences concerning aspects of FL1 and FL2 learning'.

3. Results

The data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0. Two independent variables were examined individually across the factors of each part of the questionnaire; gender (male, female) and year of study. These were independently determined by two raters giving a consistency of 0.96. The factors were cognitive, memory and metacognitive strategies. Frequencies were calculated independently for each question and are presented in tables 1, 2 & 3.

3.1. Language learning strategies

3.1.1. Cognitive strategies used in English as FL1 and in German as FL2

In the attempt to record the cognitive strategies employed by LSP students in English language, it was revealed that in their majority they appeared to be relying on ‘activating background knowledge’ (35%), ‘translating in L1’ (32%) and ‘explaining vocabulary in English/paraphrasing’ (33.5%). Also, a significant number of them showed particular interest in ‘note-taking’ (28.6%) and ‘using newly acquired words in a sentence /text’ (29.4%).

Concerning FL2, the students showed a high degree of involvement in a less ‘elaborated’ cognitive strategy: ‘using a bilingual dictionary’ (36.2%), as well as ‘activating background knowledge’ from L1 and FL1 (25.5%) and ‘using synonyms’ (25.5%), when encountering a problem with recalling and using certain vocabulary items. It is worth mentioning that ‘summarising’ and ‘decoding words’ in order to guess their meaning’ were the least favourite strategies both in FL1 and FL2 (see table 1).

Table 1. Percentages of cognitive strategies employed in FL1 and FL2

Cognitive language strategies	Much		Moderately		Little	
	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)
Translate in L1	32	24	39.2	18	28.7	58
Guess the meaning of new vocabulary from the context	21.9	16.3	48.4	36.7	30.1	46.9
Activate background knowledge	35	25.5	46.6	27.7	18.4	46.8
Use bilingual dictionary	27.9	36.2	32.6	17	39.5	46.8
Take notes and write down words/phrases	28.6	21.3	37.2	25.5	34.2	53.2
Use synonyms	25.9	25.5	35.3	23.4	38.8	51.1
Decode unknown words	14.6	8.3	23.2	25	62.2	66.7
Use newly acquired words in the sentence /text	29.4	18.4	38.6	34.7	32	46.9
Write a summary	16.1	19.1	23.8	12.8	60.1	68.1
Explain vocabulary in English/paraphrase	33.5	13.6	35.6	31.8	30.8	54.5

3.1.2. Memory strategies used in English as FL1 and in German as FL2

Concerning memory strategies, ‘using dramatized dialogues’ to memorize patterns and ‘repetition of words/phrases’ either orally or in a written form in order to memorize them proved to be the most useful strategies employed both in English (FL1) and German (FL2) (see table 2).

Table 2. Percentages of memory strategies employed in FL1 and FL2

Memory language strategies	Much		Moderately		Little	
	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)
Mime native speakers	20.1	14.3	28.1	26.5	51.8	59.2
Correlate L2 vocabulary that assimilates to L1 vocabulary	27.8	25	39.8	29.2	32.5	45.8
Repeat words/phrases to memorize	30.4	22.9	38.4	16.7	31.2	60.4
Dramatized dialogues to memorize patterns	38.8	23.4	27.8	19.1	33.4	57.4
Ask teacher to speak slowly	14.5	14.9	32	25.5	53.3	59.6

3.1.3. Metacognitive strategies used in English as FL1 and in German as FL2

As regards the metacognitive strategies the LSP students involved in FL1 learning, ‘seeking practice opportunities in FL1’ (44.2%) and ‘attempting to speak despite possible occurring mistakes’ (29.4%) as well as ‘attempting to write despite possible occurring mistakes’ (28.9%) received high percentages of students’ preferences. On the contrary, LSP students showed less interest in metacognitive strategy employment in German as FL2. Only ‘seeking practice opportunities in FL2’ (31.1%) proved to be a favourite one (see table 3).

Table 3. Percentages of metacognitive strategies employed in FL1 and FL2

Metacognitive Language Strategies	Much		Moderately		Little	
	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)	FL1 (%)	FL2 (%)
Attempt to write despite possible occurring mistakes	28.9	8.3	39	39.6	32.1	52.1
Attempt to speak despite possible occurring mistakes	29.4	16.3	45.8	38.8	24.8	44.9
Seek practice opportunities in FL	44.2	31.1	33.9	20	21.8	48.9
Pre-plan for a language activity	27.4	17.8	36	24.4	36.6	57.8
Self-monitor and self evaluate	28.3	14	43.2	25.6	28.6	60.5

Comparisons were made with gender and year of study as independent variables and total score on each of the three factors (cognitive, memory, metacognitive). Higher scores indicated increased use of the learning techniques for the English language and the German language. Independent samples t-tests were used to assess differences.

The results showed statistically significant differences between male and female students on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in learning English. Specifically female used more cognitive strategies (mean=16.67, SD=4.29) compared to male (mean=15.70, SD=4.73) [$t(352)=1.929$, $p<0.05$]. Similarly, the female used more metacognitive strategies (mean=10.08, SD=2.90) compared to male (mean=9.42, SD=3.01) [$t(352)=1.971$, $p<0.05$]. Moreover, students showed more metacognitive awareness in English as FL1 (mean=10.48, SD=2.90) compared to German as FL2 (mean=9.02, SD=3.01).

3.2. Preferences for aspects of learning English as FL1 and German as FL2

In the effort made to specify students' preferences for aspects of learning English as FL1 and German as FL2, the following aspects were highlighted; Having the teacher: a) 'consider students' individual needs', b) 'adapt the teaching process to their individual needs' (74.1%) and c) 'provide feedback/immediate correction' (73.8%) received the highest percentages on the students' part. In addition, a significant percentage of the students opted for 'photocopied materials for extra grammar practice' (70.3%) and 'text translation in L1 by the teacher' (70.1%).

Meanwhile, 'learning through using a personal computer in the classroom' (66.8%) as well as 'cooperating with classmates' (62.5%) were also considered by the students as preferred ways of FL learning. On the contrary, lower percentages of the target population stated that they learn better when 'performing dialogues based on the textbooks stimuli grade' (59.6%) and 'being taught grammar as an autonomous subject' (55.3%). Finally, 'memorizing dialogues by learning textbook dialogues by heart' (34.2%) and 'expressing themselves freely without correction' (42.4%) gained the lowest percentages.

4. Discussion

The data indicated a satisfactory degree of strategic awareness on the part of the LSP students in both FL1 and FL2 learning. Concerning cognitive strategy use, higher order processes and strategies such as activation of background knowledge and note-taking, were recorded in FL1. This is justifiable on the basis of the students' language competence in FL1, which also has a considerably higher status in the Greek educational system compared to FL2. Nevertheless, the compensatory strategy of correlating L2 vocabulary that assimilates L1 was declared as frequently used strategy in both foreign languages. Also, differences were revealed between the two languages concerning metacognitive awareness and strategy use due to the students' higher language level in FL1 along with the teacher's approach to strategy development. The findings are in accordance with previous studies (Green & Oxford 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), which revealed that advanced students, because of their higher level of metacognitive awareness tend to more often use cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

For this reason, students should be trained in order to develop metacognitive awareness and strategy use since it is believed that when they think strategically they are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy in relation to their language learning ability (Chamot, 2004; Oxford, 1990).

In addition, a significant effect of the factor ‘gender’ upon strategy use was revealed. This is in accordance with the results of previous studies (Green & Oxford, 1995; Griva et al, 2009; Rosen, 1995), which found a greater use of strategies by female students.

Moreover, in terms of the students learning preferences in FL1 and FL2 it was suggested that they would appreciate an analysis of their learning needs as well as a consideration of these needs in the syllabus design process (Griva, Chostelidou, & Tsakiridou, 2008). A further important aspect is that they also sought for cooperation with their classmates during the learning process as well as activation of their social strategies and skills. In effect, it should be considered that since learning is inevitably affected by learning styles and strategies, there is evidence that in the case of students who are able to employ multiple learning styles, the learning outcome is higher (Felder, 1995). Therefore, it is a challenge for the FL syllabus to develop their communicative competence in the target language and train them in a wide range of language strategies in order to deal efficiently with their communicative purposes and to become more autonomous foreign language learners (House, 2003; Oxford, 1990).

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