

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LEARNER STRATEGY RESEARCH FOR THE PRACTISING TEACHER IN SERBIA?

Апстракт: Основни циљ ове студије¹ је да се истраже стратегије учења у настави страног језика на једном од факултета у Србији, с тим да се у разматрање укључе и ставови студената о учесталости њихових коришћења. Један од циљева је и да се издвоје стратегије учења које студенти највише користе у настави страног језика на факултету (у овом случају на Педагошком факултету у Јагодини) и да се истражи да ли наставници који изводе наставу имају користи од истраживања које се тиче стратегија учења у настави страног језика.

Кључне речи: стратегије учења, настава страног језика, истраживање у настави, диференцирана настава, индивидуализација

1. INTRODUCTION

I am hypothesizing that research in learner strategies would be helpful for university teachers in order to find out which strategies are used by their learners and to suggest alternative strategies for those learners who are less successful in language learning. In this way it would be possible to suggest learning strategies for organizing and storing information and to encourage students to consider which strategies work best for them.

For my research, two questionnaires were used: SILL questionnaire taken from Oxford (1990) which was filled in both by students and by teachers and a questionnaire for English language teachers adapted from Ellis and Sinclair (1989). Students were asked to indicate if they use a certain strategy and how often they use it while teachers were asked to indicate what strategies their students use and how often. The results revealed that students and teachers perceptions of the frequency of the strategy usage mismatch very much. However, although teachers state that they do conduct strategy research, it is felt that an attempt to improve such research could possibly be carried out; despite the fact that it may require hard effort.

¹ Напомена: текст који је овде дат представља део магистарског рада одбрањеног на Педагошком факултету у Нотингему. Тема рада је „Које су предности истраживања стратегија учења за наставника који изводи наставу енглеског језика у Србији“. Истраживање је извршено на Педагошком факултету у Јагодини у мају и јуну 2007. године.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Specifically, the research questions we are aiming to answer are:

1. Which groups of LLS are believed to be used most frequently by students who are speakers of other languages?
2. How do teachers' beliefs concerning the LLS of their students correspond with what students report?
3. How often do university teachers give learning tips to their students? Are they able to identify their students' learning problems in order to give them useful advice?
4. Do university teachers encourage their students to take control of their learning?
5. Are teachers aware of the most used learning strategies in their language classes?
6. What is the frequency of learning strategies that students use in the class?
7. What are the benefits/limits of learner training on language learning achievement?
8. Do university teachers conduct research in their classrooms, and if they do, how often they do it?
9. What are the benefits of language learning strategy (LLS) research for the practising teacher in Serbia?

3. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

1. If we identify the range of possible learner strategies used by students in university teaching context we would be able to identify the strategies of good, successful learners and made them available to less successful learners.
2. Provide an environment which facilitates the identification by students of those strategies that suit them best and work best for them.
3. Learner strategy research in the language classroom seems to be one of the important parts of the teacher's role. Thereupon, if teachers are willing to researches in their own classroom then they will be in position to find out possible language learning problems of their students and solutions for them.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to Westwood and Arnold (2004) it is highly desirable for teachers to recognize individual differences among learners and to use methods that allow them to address these differences in positive ways. This is where strategy training and strategy research is taking place.

However, research on students' individual needs, in several countries, has indicated that teachers do not find differentiation easy to implement (e.g. Westwood, 2002). I believe that there is some scepticism in terms of differentiation

in university teaching context in Serbia. Namely, it seems that teachers' practical work is mostly directed according to the curriculum which is believed to be well organised and structured. It is also believed that curriculum should be conducted as it is and that there is not much space for teacher's creativity. As a matter of fact, some teachers seem to be confident that sufficient number of strategies is embedded into existing curriculum which can be taught to students with only modest extra effort, and that can improve the overall class performance. Scepticism is also well-placed when it comes to applying the strategy training in university teaching context because it is widely believed that students are adult learners who know how to learn (this is to a certain extent students' opinion and to some extent teachers' opinion). Nevertheless, students' achievements in exams show that they do encounter learning problems and that they do need teacher's professional help. Thus, teachers' practices and perceptions are significant in terms of strategy training since they have the potential to influence the effectiveness of their students' learning process.

Interestingly, it is not so much all the strategies that teachers could teach and their students to use; it is how they use them, when they use them, how they decide what is working or not working for them at a particular situation, when they decide to use something else, how they deal with the product of that strategy and how it helps them to take over some of the decision making for their own language learning outcome. In other words, there are lots of questions that could be answered by, for instance, conducting the strategy research. Strategy research seems to be crucial for the learner training in the university teaching context in Serbia because it would give teachers clear and practical notion of what learners actually do and what are the benefits, or even drawbacks, of this instruction (Archibald and McDonough 2006).

For the purpose of further discussion I would like to refer back to research question: *What are the benefits of learner strategy research for the practising teacher in Serbia?* One of the benefits of the LLS research in this teaching context might be finding out whether somebody's learning to be independent target language learner or not. This could be done not by asking students to practice all the strategies teacher has taught them a few months earlier, but helping them to develop their own strategies for the new learning situations they are in. Clearly, "strategy training aims at improving learning techniques and increasing the motivation to learn, its results are manifested in long-term changes in learners' behaviour and attitudes towards FL study, rather than in rapid improvements in FL proficiency" (ibid. p.68).

Another benefit from strategy research for the practising teacher in Serbia might be helping a teacher to bring right decisions in accordance with the strategy research findings in the right moment. In a sense, teachers sometimes need to make decisions in the classroom in haste which is very often not harmonized with students' needs, perceptions and their feelings. In this area teachers need lots of information such as: How to make right decision in terms of helping a particular student to be more successful language learner? How to help all students who need teachers' help at the same time? How to provide different treatments for different

students? etc. All these questions might be answered by conducting the strategy research which would give clear picture of the students' learning situation and teacher's teaching situation. Strategy research would enlighten classroom situation for a particular moment and it would give some notions how to act in the future in terms of students' language learning problems and teacher's teaching problems.

The next benefit from strategy research might be to explore students' feeling in terms of language learning and in that way help them to overcome fears in this area (such as fear of making a mistake which is very frequent according to my study). Then, advantage of strategy research for the practising teacher might be detecting LLS that students use most frequently (metacognitive strategies in this case) and try to help them develop those that are least used (affective and memory strategies). Also, teachers might find out which group of strategies suit their students best and in what way students would like their teacher to present them a certain topic. Exploring strategies would help teachers realize that, for instance, more speaking does not necessarily mean better speaking or more reading does not automatically mean better reading (Field 1998). Still, practicing strategies in the language classroom would result in using them with less effort and, at the same time, more successful dealing with language tasks would become part of the learning atmosphere (Ridgeway 2000). Hence, according to this, both strategy training and strategy research seem very important for all language skills. Although strategy research is very important in the language learning field, it is not practiced very much in the Serbian classroom. For this reason, I would like to indicate that it is important for the university teaching context and if teachers conduct it regularly they would have lots of benefits from it.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that my impression is that we need lots more of that kind of research and it could be incorporated into teacher training in very productive ways. It is being done, but it seems to me that it is an area that could be expanded quite a lot in Serbia.

5. SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings of this study are:

1) Language learning strategy usage is medium in frequency (overall average of LLS usage is 3.16)

2) Students most frequently use metacognitive strategies and social strategies, followed by cognitive, compensation and memory strategies while the least frequently used are affective strategies.

3) Students are mostly afraid of using English and making mistakes in class (37% of responses) and they rarely write down their feelings in language learning diary (70.83% of responses)

4) Students are mostly trying to be better learners of English (33.33%) and they think about their progress of learning English (20.83%).

5) Teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B) who participated in this survey seem to be familiar with the students LLS usage in L2 class only partially.

6) Teachers believe that their students most frequently use compensation and memory strategies but that was not the case, their students most frequently use metacognitive strategies and social strategies.

7) In teachers' view, their students least frequently use social and metacognitive strategies but, on the contrary, those are the most frequently used strategies.

8) Students and teachers perceptions in terms of strategy usage concur only in terms of affective strategies.

9) Improved LLS research in the university teaching context in Serbia seem to be necessary for the improvement of English language teaching practice.

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КОЈЕ СУ ПРЕДНОСТИ ИСТРАЖИВАЊА СТРАТЕГИЈА УЧЕЊА ЗА НАСТАВНИКА КОЈИ ИЗВОДИ НАСТАВУ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА У СРБИЈИ

РЕЗИМЕ

У студији се истражују стратегије учења у настави страног језика на једном од факултета у Србији, с тим да су у разматрање укључени и ставови студената о учесталости њихових коришћења. Издвојене су и анализиране стратегије учења које су студенти највише користили у настави страног језика на факултету (у овом случају на Педагошком факултету у Јагодини), као и то да ли су наставници који изводе наставу имали користи од истраживања које се тиче стратегија учења у настави страног језика.