Raising Students' Awareness in Language Learning

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Abstract. In response to the orientation towards life-long studies in the information society, one of the main goals of university education is to teach students how to study, to train them towards self-directiveness and self-awareness in their studies. Practice and theoretical research have shown that special efforts and approaches are needed for developing these skills.

The present paper deals with the study of students' awareness in language learning carried out at the Centre of Foreign Languages, Kaunas University of Technology. The results of the students' survey conducted as a part of Socrates project INSTAL are analysed and conclusions are formulated. Ways of developing the learners' self-awareness and its impact upon language learning efficiency are discussed.

The paper also describes special language learning strategies under development in the INSTAL project.

The last decade has witnessed crucial changes in language learning environments, goals and requirements. The prevailing tendency on the European scale has been expressed in the Synthesis Report of the Socrates Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages (2001):

"A central goal of current approaches to language learning/teaching is to enhance the learners' control over the learning process. These approaches stress the importance of 'learning to learn'; learners need to be taught strategies that will enable them to cope with new technologies and new learning environments".

It is important for teachers to make learners aware of the processes involved in language learning and to help them find environments that suit their needs best. Learners should be helped to absorb the principles of autonomy in a gradual way, since paradoxically, autonomy grows of interaction and dependence, as a consequence of the social-interactive roots of learning (Little, 1991). Therefore a balance must be found between providing opportunities for the learners to take control over their learning while at the same time supporting those learners who are not ready or who feel unprepared to take on this responsibility for themselves."

The significance of individual learner's autonomy and self-directiveness development has been stressed by different researchers (P. Benson, L. Dickinson, G. Ellis, H. Holec, D. Little, B. Sinclair, M. Warschauer, etc.). B. Sinclair (1999) points out that "the development of learner autonomy, at least to some degree and with differing interpretations, appears to be almost universally accepted as an important, general educational goal."

Following the most generally accepted definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own directed learning' (Holec, 1981), learners have to develop special skills for determining their own needs, goals, ways of learning and evaluation. This is not something people are born with – the learners have to be taught how to help themselves, how to manage their own learning.

"Raising the awareness of one's own learning and gaining an understanding of the processes involved is thus another important key for the development of autonomous learning" (Kohonen, 1991).

The above considerations have given rise to **the problem** of the present research: enhancing the learners' self-awareness and self-directiveness in language learning because "without an explicit and conscious awareness of the processes involved in learning a language, learners will not be in a position to make informed decisions about their own learning" (Sinclair, 1999).

The aim of the study was to determine and develop students' understanding of the learning process so that they could apply the acquired skills consciously, thus becoming able to take control over their learning.

The methods used were survey and empirical study as well as analysis of relevant scientific literature.

In order to choose appropriate ways of raising students' awareness we should consider language learning as learner development in three interrelated areas (Kohonen 1991):

- *personal awareness:* self-concept, self-esteem and self-direction;
- *awareness of the learning process:* process management;
- *task awareness:* knowledge of language and communication.

Thus, efficient enhancement of the students' language competence requires systematic development of all the three aspects, i.e., acquisition of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. An explicit explanation of the significance of these different capacities is presented by Harris (2001):

"Whereas cognitive strategies are the strategies directly involved in grappling with the language itself (making sense of a text, for example), metacognitive strategies are what we use to deploy them in the first place, how we organize, control and modify our thought processes. There is a danger that we see strategies as isolated, individual tools for specific tasks. Yet, these global, overarching 'thinking skills' seem to be at the heart of the

efficient use of strategies. So a learner may have the cognitive strategies needed to carry out a task but 'yet be unable to use that skill appropriately, that is unable to select or retrieve the appropriate skill when it is needed" (Nisbet and Schucksmith, 1984).

Indeed some researchers go as far as to say that inefficient performance of tasks can be better explained in terms of deficiencies at the metacognitive level than deficits of knowledge or intellectual capacity.

For a long way there were scarce attempts to join all the constituent parts into a whole in order to facilitate and support the language learning process. However, rapid access of new learning environments, new teaching methods and growing students' autonomy have led to increased attention towards the harmonious development of all the above mentioned factors. It has become vitally important for teachers to make learners aware of the processes involved in language learning and to help them find ways that suit their needs best.

Special focus on the issue of raising personal awareness through metacognitive strategies was introduced within the framework of Grundtvig project INSTAL (Individualising Strategies for Adult Learners in Language and ICT-Learning).

The aim of the project is to develop a set of tools to help adult learners discover and make use of their individual learning styles and thereby overcome the lack of awareness of preferred individual learning strategies/styles. The necessity of the project arises from general experience that a lot of learners were never made aware of their individual strengths/weaknesses or learning styles at school and therefore need support in identifying their specific needs, discovering their preferred learning styles and organizing their own learning (INSTAL, 2000).

For this purpose a questionnaire for determining the students' awareness was developed by the project partners and tried out at Knas University of Technology. Part of the findings concerning students' motivation, preferences in choosing learning styles and their own efforts in order to enhance their language proficiency were discussed in the paper "Changing Roles in Language Learning" (Rinkeviciene, Zdanyte, 2001). The students' survey results led to the following conclusions:

- promotion and development of the skills needed in self-directed language learning should be an integral part of the curriculum,
- students' awareness of their capabilities and responsibilities should be enhanced,
- students' self-study should be encouraged,
- students' interests and needs should be taken into account, thus increasing their motivation in learning.

The aim of the second part of the INSTAL questionnaire was to raise the students' awareness of factors influencing the efficiency of their studies by considering their learning experience in general. The students were asked to reflect upon their own successes and failures by answering the following questions:

What did you learn successfully?

How did you learn it?
Why were you successful?
What did you not learn successfully?
How did you try to learn it?
Why was it not a successful experience?

The respondents (64 first-year and 42 second-year students) enumerated a wide range of subjects: from sports and music to driving and computer skills. Irrespective of the subject, the prevailing reasons of success were:

- motivation (55%),
- plenty of practice (60%),

while the most frequent causes of failures were:

- no motivation (26%),
- badly taught (27%),
- no time for studies (18%).

In the task following these considerations students were asked to think and write down what they should/should not do to improve their language learning. Among a wide variety of suggestions the most common ideas expressed by the respondents were that they should study more (50%), communicate in English (48%), devote more time to self-study (30%), should not be lazy (25%) or miss classes (22%). The low percentage (only 5%) of suggestions that 'there should be more motivation' shows that students are highly interested in languages and aware of the need to put more effort in order to be more successful in their studies.

In this part of the questionnaire students were made to turn their conscious attention to personal experiences, feelings and attitudes concerning the learning process, to make conclusions and thus strengthen their own sense of responsibility. "If we can help the learner to improve his view of himself he may become a better learner, being able to utilize his learning potential more fully" (Kohonen, 1991). Self-assessment of one's own strengths and weaknesses raises the degree of the learner's awareness in future planning and decision making.

The next part of the questionnaire focused on different styles of learning. It has been generally acknowledged that people vary significantly in how they acquire knowledge. Different theories and numerous researchers have presented substantial proof to make a conclusion that the key to learning efficiency lies in understanding learning style preferences which can positively or negatively influence a student's performance (Gardner, 1983; Kolb, 1985; Birkey and Rodman, 1995; Dewar, 1996; Hartman, 1995, etc). Some of the theories concentrate on the cognitive processing of information (Kolb, 1985), others emphasize emotional and sociological attributes (Endorf and McNeff, 1991) or base their classification on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). Obviously, no one theory can adequately address the diversity of each individual learner, but reflection and analysis of the cognitive processes give better guidance in further studies and application of one's strengths.

Besides, awareness of different learning styles directs teachers towards differentiating tasks for students as

'whether we define the differences in terms of visual/auditory or activists/reflectors/ theorists and pragmatists, we are faced with a problem of how to cater for all these different styles' (Harris, 2001).

A commonly accepted way of categorizing people's different learning styles is determining whether the person is of visual, auditory or kinaesthetic type. This approach was used in the INSTAL questionnaire as the basis for helping students to become aware of their preferred learning styles and make use of them in their future studies.

With this purpose in mind, a list of statements was presented:

- I have a good memory for faces;
- I like to make things;
- I like to listen to people;
- I remember things that I have done;
- I remember things that I have felt;
- I can remember words to music easily;
- I need to have things written down so that I can look at them later, etc.,

from which the students were asked to choose and tick the ones which applied most to them. By summing up their answers and using the key given by the authors, the respondents were able to find out about their own – visual, auditory or kinaesthetic – learning style. The results showed that students of visual type prevailed (30%), followed by those of auditory type (24%), while others defined themselves as kinaesthetic (17%) or mixtures of visual-auditory type (18%).

The findings of the study based on the Project questionnaire are important both for teachers and learners in a number of aspects, namely:

In order to improve the quality of the teaching/learning process, different learning styles should be taken into account in addition to the considerations about the content of the syllabus.

Balanced learning tasks should be planned, appropriate to different learning styles.

Training learners to analyse, assess and reflect upon their own learning preferences raises their awareness and facilitates setting their learning goals.

- Learners acquire a clearer understanding of language learning/teaching processes.
- Learners' self-assessment develops motivation and conscious involvement in the learning process.

The following commentaries by the students serve as an illustration of the conclusions made above:

"I liked the questionnaire since it really concerns my motivation and self-study".
"Completing the questionnaire makes you think about your attitude".
"The questions are quite unusual, but very useful".
"I have understood I am the only person I can count on".

"It took me some time to think of the answers and even analyze things which seemed not important to me earlier".
"It was useful for me to understand my aims in learning English".

Undoubtedly, the findings of the questionnaire will be helpful in practice if they are promoted regularly and continuously throughout the language course and incorporated in the language acquisition process, closely linked with other tasks performed by the learners. It would make up the first constituent of the three interrelated areas vital in learner development, as mentioned above (Kohonen).

Another area – awareness of the learning process – has been addressed by INSTAL project in the following stage, i.e., in producing a manual on learning strategies for adult language learners.

A strong argument for providing such support for language learners is presented in the book "Modern Languages and Learning Strategies in Theory and Practice" (Grenfell, Harris):

"If successful learners have a wider repertoire of strategies than their less successful peers, then it seems sensible to intervene and offer them the opportunity to acquire these tools. It could also be argued that making explicit to students how to go about the learning process might not only serve to increase such learners' range of strategies, it might also improve their motivation".

The project manual under development covers the following areas:

- Reading strategies
- Listening strategies
- Memorisation strategies
- Writing strategies
- Communication strategies

Each of the strategies is being taught through a cycle of stages:

Step 1. Awareness raising.

The purpose of this step is to encourage learners to reflect on the learning process – how they acquire different language skills.

Step 2. Modelling.

In this part students are given a wide choice of alternative learning strategies that they can apply according to their preferences and different learning styles.

Step 3. General practice.

Time is given for trying out new strategies, evaluating them in terms of preference, sharing experience and giving reasons for their preferences.

Step 4. Action planning.

Learners devise their own action plan, thus linking their skills, goals and appropriate strategies and getting a clearer view of the learning process.

Step 5. Focused practice.

This step gives an opportunity for further practice of the selected strategies and revision of the previous steps.

Step 6. Evaluating strategy acquisition and recommencing the cycle.

Learners and teachers evaluate the success of action plans and new plans are devised for further practice.

By using this systematic and logical way of developing highly individualised learning strategies learners acquire appropriate tools for improving their learning awareness, efficiency and learning autonomy. As stressed by Grenfell and Harris (1991), "the steps in the cycle of 'awareness raising', 'action planning' and 'evaluation' reflect the concern to empower the learner by making the learning process explicit and providing them with opportunities to direct their own learning. Furthermore, O'Mailey and Chamot (1990) report that the addition of such metacognitive elements has been helpful in maintaining strategy use over time and in transferring strategies to new tasks. If it is also the case that success depends not on the use of one individual strategy but on the effective management of a repertoire of strategies, then learners themselves need to be able to make conscious, informed choices."

41 students of Kaunas University of Technology participated in piloting Memorisation Strategies and 57 – in piloting Listening Strategies in spring 2002.

When evaluating the Memorisation Strategies materials, 98% of the students stated that the materials were helpful to them, while only 2% expressed a negative attitude. Almost half of the students admitted they had become more aware of learning strategies, even though some of them said they had not acquired any new strategies. The following suggestions for improving the materials showed the students' active involvement and interest in the subject:

o To think of more strategies
o To give more examples, more practice,
o To provide more statistical data,
o To give more feedback.

The 57 students participating in piloting *Listening Strategies* were also positive in evaluating the materials: over two thirds of them considered the materials helpful and there was not a single negative answer. All the respondents unanimously stated that they had become more aware of the strategies that they used and that they had adopted new strategies. Over two thirds of the students stressed that more examples of new strategies should be given. And perhaps the most supportive evaluation was: "Tell other teachers about learning strategies so that they could help us".

Conclusions

The results of the present study have supported the theoretical research stressing that the development of metacognitive awareness in the learner, or knowledge about learning, is of vital importance in enhancing language learning efficiency. Therefore, raising students' awareness of the learning processes should become an integral part of the general language curriculum, thus increasing their ability to review their own progress, accomplishments and future learning directions.

Our investigation has shown that in order to improve the students' learning capacity, proper attention should be given to developing both cognitive and metacognitive aspects, i.e.,

- personal awareness: self-concept, self-esteem and self-direction;
- awareness of the learning process: process management;
- task awareness: knowledge of language and communication.

It is evident that all the three aspects have to be organically integrated in the language learning/teaching process and systematically referred to throughout the language course.

The questionnaire and the materials on learning strategies provided by the INSTAL project, designed to facilitate the process of language learning and to develop the learners' self-awareness, have been positively evaluated by the students of Kaunas University of Technology.

The survey findings show that the project materials have helped learners to develop a clear and conscious attitude towards their learning goals, styles and preferred methods, as well as to expand their learning potential through a wide range of new learning strategies.

The positive students' evaluation of the materials gives an impetus for further development of relevant language learner support and its integration into the language learning/teaching process.

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Studentų suvokimo ugdymas mokantis kalbų

Santrauka

Žinių ir informacijos visuomenėje vienas pagrindinių universitetinio mokymo tikslų yra išmokyti studentus mokytis, ugdyti jų pačių mokymosi proceso suvokimą ir sugebėjimą jį valdyti. Ir praktika, ir teoriniai tyrimai rodo, kad tam reikalingi specialūs įgūdžiai.

Straipsnio autorės supažindina su studentų suvokimo tyrimais, atliktais Kauno technologijos universiteto Užsienio kalbų centre, analizuoja studentų apklausos rezultatus ir pateikia išvadas.

Straipsnyje aptariami esminiai kalbų mokymosi būdai ir pristatomas Grungtvig INSTAL projektas, kurio tikslas - padėti besimokantiems kalbų geriau pažinti savo individualų mokymosi stilių ir taikyti individualias mokymosi strategijas, kurios leistų padidinti mokymosi efektyvumą.

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