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Assessing the use of foreign language learning strategies and their effectiveness at the upper secondary comprehensive schools in the Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

The use and effectiveness of foreign language learning strategies (FLLS) was assessed by SILL inventory constructed on the basis of Oxford FLLS taxonomy (1990) at upper secondary comprehensive schools in the Czech Republic. The article describes using of 85 strategies – direct (memory strategies, cognitive, compensation strategies) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, social). The strategies were used at average only seldom. 40% of the SILL strategies are not used at all, 85% are used not enough. Direct strategies were significantly more used than indirect strategies. The significantly most used group of strategies were compensatory strategies, the least used were affective and memory strategies. Half of the 606 learners were not interested how to learn effectively or better, most of them do not have goals in learning and do not plan learning.

From the 85 strategies only 46 was found to correlate with some of the indicators of learning effectiveness. In addition 87% of these 46 strategies are less used, whereas 26% from these 46 strategies are very seldom or never used. The most effective group was cognitive strategies. In the regression model the strategies explain quite well and significantly the grade at school and the proficiency, the model is better if we include some other variables like motivation, stay abroad, and teacher). A significantly positive effect of teacher on learning strategies was found.

KEY WORDS

Learning strategies, second language acquisition, secondary schools

1. INTRODUCTION

The article describes a complex research into what type of foreign language learning strategies (FLLS) learners use at the upper secondary comprehensive school level in the Czech Republic. FLLS are understood as sets of actions, steps, plans, procedures used by a learner to obtain, remember, recall and use information.

2. METHODS

The strategy inventory SILL (Oxford 1990) was used together with a questionnaire focusing on general characteristics of learners and their learning of a preferred language. SILL focuses on 6 areas of strategies relating to the classification of R. L. Oxford (1990): memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Learners had to

indicate how often they use the strategies on a scale from 1 (never, almost never) to 5 (always, almost always).

The effectiveness of strategies was investigated regarding to (1) the overall effectiveness of learning defined as the best achievement in the shortest period of time (index of effectiveness); (2) grade in foreign language at school – as an objectified indicator for short time effectiveness of learning, (3) overall level of language proficiency and (4) the level of skills' proficiency (reading, writing, listening, speaking).

The research sample consisted of 14 upper secondary comprehensive schools (gymnazium) in the second biggest city in the Czech Republic (Brno) and included 29 classes and 606 respondents at the age of 17 – 18 (52% females).

3. FINDINGS

Most of the pupils learnt 2 (59%) or 3 (34%) languages. 92% of pupils had been learning the languages for 7 – 12 years at the maximum (correlated with the compulsory school attendance). The average time of learning of all languages that pupils learn was 4 – 8 years (84%). All the pupils learn English (99%), mostly for the period of 6 – 10 years. 70% learn German, 30% Latin (in average for 3 years), 19% French, 18% Russian, 9% Spanish and 3% Italian. 79% of pupils preferred English, 13% German, 3% French, 2% Russian. The most frequent reasons for preferring a language were the usability, better knowledge and the interests in the language. 51% of learners assessed their proficiency comparing to the native speakers as good, 33% as acceptable, and 8% excellent and 8% at a very low level. The level of the development of the four language skills were the best at the preferred language (good level): the pupils assessed themselves as the best in reading, then speaking, writing and the worst in listening. 30% of pupils thought they were learning in an effective way, 40% answered they know how to learn, and 41% that they are talented for the language.

The most important motivators for the FLL were future career (75%), compulsory school leaving exam (65%), travelling (64%). The less important motivation was the parents' wishes for the pupil to learn. For 53% of learners it was important to be successful in the language. 80% assess their teacher as excellent or good. 34% said the teacher tells them how to learn and 34% said the teacher practice it too. Both type of instruction had significant positive influence on using strategies. 41% of learners visited for some time a foreign country where the language is spoken (mostly Great Brittan, Germany, and Austria). 44% of learners attend private lessons outside the school.

The FLLS are relatively seldom used (2,7 points at the scale). The learners usually do not use 32 (38%) of the 85 strategies. 84% (71) of the strategies were used not enough (<3,50). Direct strategies were significantly more used than indirect strategies. Significant differences were among using the six subgroups of strategies too. The most used were compensatory strategies (3,46), cognitive (2,95), metacognitive (2,72), social (2,61), memory strategies (2,26). Least (very seldom) used were affective strategies (2,12).

Critical results are in the memory strategies – learners do not use associations by learning vocabulary and basic mnemotechnics based on learning styles. Often used is a compensatory strategy guessing on the basis of language knowledge (only 10% do not use it). Some of the metacognitive strategies were on a critical level: 52% pupils were not interested in how to learn effectively or better, 57% had not long-time goals in learning, 67% did not plan learning

into their time programme, 74% did not learn language regularly. A half of the learners were focusing on mistakes. Affective strategies were more likely to be used by learners with FLL difficulties – as an effective strategy were found only self-encouraging and acceptance of risk by learning and using FL. Two social strategies were important – friend for conversation/writing, cooperation and asking for help native speakers, whereas both belong to the least used, but the most effective strategies – the effectiveness was found regarding all indicators of effectiveness.

The effectiveness of all strategies was not statistically proved. Single strategies and the groups of strategies differ in their effectiveness. From the 85 strategies only 46 was found to correlate with some of the indicators of effectiveness. 87% of these 46 strategies are less used (< 3,50), whereas even 26% from these strategies are very seldom or never used.

The most effective (regarding all the indicators) are strategies like imitating native speakers, using known words in many combinations, initiating conversation, thinking in FL, reading in FL, writing of sms, letters, essays; not translating word-for-word. Most effective metacognitive strategies are finding out opportunities for practicing the language; noticing errors and their reasons. From social strategies: friend for letter-writing or conversation, asking the native speakers for help, interest in the FL culture. The effectiveness of memory strategies was not found to any of the indicators of effectiveness.

Comparing the most often used strategies and the strategies with the highest effectiveness, we cannot say that the most often used strategies are always the effective. We also cannot state that the strategies effective regarding the long-term effectiveness of learning or regarding the grades or the language skills or proficiency were the same; on the contrary, they differ.

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