

I am learning French

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The present research investigates the 10 year old learners' way of thinking about the procedures they use when learning a foreign language. It evaluates children's awareness concerning listening, speaking, reading and writing. Two questionnaires were used aiming to show at what activities children show a more analytical or a more synthetical way of thinking. The results have been analysed and discussed.

Introduction

In autumn 1991 the project of early foreign language learning was introduced in Croatian schools. That year about 350 first graders started to learn a foreign language as part of the regular school curriculum. The project is sponsored by the Croatian Ministry of Education and the authorities of the city of Zagreb. The research part is supported by the Ministry of Science and conducted by a group of FLT specialists from the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Zagreb. The project is a part of a network of similar projects in 20 European countries under the umbrella of the Council of Europe entitled *Language Learning for the European Citizenship*.

In autumn 1991 English, French and German were introduced into the first grade of 12 primary schools in Zagreb (about 350 pupils) and one year later Italian to 2 schools. The majority of schools which joined the project is concentrated in Zagreb, but there are also some in Rijeka, Pula, Split and Osijek. There are now more than 700 pupils in the project learning one of the foreign language.

Each class is split into two groups of 12-15 children who have 5 periods of foreign language weekly during the first two years, and 4 periods during the third and the fourth year. The classes are taken by secondary school teachers with a university language degree and additional training for working with young children. They cooperate closely with the class teacher who in most cases has some command of the language being taught.

Present research

Since the beginning of the project many different areas of research have been covered, for ex. on motivation, language abilities, interaction in story telling, communicative strategies, and so on.

The children have passed many varied tests aiming to evaluate their linguistic competence on all the levels but mostly on the morpho-syntactical and lexical levels.

Being responsible for the French teaching in the project we decided to do research which would investigate childrens' a way of thinking and their procedures when learning. We thought that the first generation of children included in the project who are now 9-10 years old and are in the fourth class of the primary school would be suitable for testing according to

- their knowledge of the foreign language and about the language
- the four skills their teachers have been practicing with them, and
- their psychological maturity.

Thinking about the language and the ways how to acquire it correlates well with the cognitive approach which has been used for years in the foreign language classes, partly even at this age and this level.

On the other hand according to up-to-date methodology, a learner cannot remain exterior any more to his learning. The teacher has to make him a person who actively participates in the attainment of his knowledge. Therefore the learner has to become conscious of some techniques and strategies which he uses and which can be either helpful or harmful in his efforts to acquire a foreign language. Auto-observation and auto-evaluation are everyday processes used in all kinds of domaines. Why not apply them to a foreign language teaching/learning? Inrospection of that kind gives the learner the opportunity of looking at himself as in a mirror, of thinking about what he is doing and in what way he is doing it when learning a foreign language. Finally it gives him the possibility to talk about the procedures he uses and the feelings he develops while learning. To become aware of some strategies used when learning an L2 helps the learner to develop the language consciousness and self awareness which is a compulsory step towards learner autonomy. The learner has never practiced this sort of thinking when learning and using his mother tongue. Bringing him to awareness of how the language is organised, of some procedures and actions at work when acquiring a foreign language, of his own capacities, helps him in attaining knowledge in general and in developing wide language awareness. This may also lead to a change of learner's attitude towards learning which can of course influence (positively or negatively) his progress.

Mental operations and hidden processes can be studied thanks to cognitive psychology. How to analyse learners' cognitive attitude in the acquisition of a foreign language inspired us when reading about some research described by J. P. Narcy in his book *Apprendre une langue étrangère* (1990).

His starting point are the two brain hemispheres. As it is known they do not act identically in language learning. They have complementary roles in comprehension and production. The left one deals with speaking, writing, reading and logical thinking. The

analytical and detailed procedures belong to it. While the synthetic, global behaviour is due to the functioning of the right one which treats also the language activities connected with rhythm, melody, creativity, visual forms, etc.

In the acquisition of a foreign language some learners proceed step by step. They analyse all information. They need descriptions, definitions, clarification, precision, logical procedures. Others, on the other hand, prefer to use synthesis, intuition, imagination.

According to the way the learner receives, stores and treats the information – intakes, understands, remembers and reuses it, various cognitive styles exist. To demonstrate the difference between the serialists and globalists. J. Courtyllon (in Narcy), a French methodologist, states:

- serialists put the difficulties into series and comprehend them one after the other; they are careful and proceed with deduction.
- globalists give importance to the relation between the entity and its parts. They are adventurous and divergent.

A good language learner is successful if his cognitive attitude is divided between the globalist and serialist qualities. He has adapted his mental processes to the language learning objectives – imposed by the curriculum and the teacher. Obviously these processes cannot be equal for all the learners. They are individual and vary from one to the other.

Narcy carried out some research which took into account these two types of foreign language learners.

We tried to do the same. We decided to evaluate children's awareness concerning listening and speaking, reading and writing. We composed two questionnaires each divided in two columns – column A would apply to a more serialist type of a learner while column B to the globalist. According to the answers we wanted to see at what activities children showed a more analytical or more synthetic way of thinking. We also thought that their answers would, at the same time, give us clues of their learning strategies. Some strategies are naturally more pronounced at the level of speaking while the others are more obvious at the level of writing. (Avoiding a subject is more noticeable during oral communication and so is code switching). Therefore some of them help the process of a foreign language acquisition but some slow it down. In any case learners use the learning strategies, unconsciously most often, to overcome some sort of a problem, to facilitate the task for themselves, to reach the goal.

Here are the two questionnaires:

WHAT SORT OF A FRENCH LEARNER AM I?

Questionnaire No. 1 Listening and speaking

A

1. I have problems in pronouncing French.
2. I do not understand properly everything said on the tape or by the teacher.
3. To understand or say something in French I help myself with Croatian.
4. If I do not understand something teacher is saying, I like it when he translates it into Croatian.
5. I like learning by heart.
6. I always think it over before I say something.
7. I remember words and sentences better if I see them written.
8. I remember a story better if I see the pictures of it or if I draw them myself.
9. I remember the words/sentences best if I learnt them by heart in poems.
10. If I do not know a word when speaking, I prefer to remain silent.
11. I mind making mistakes when speaking.
12. I like it if the teacher corrects me when speaking.
13. French pronunciation does not seem anything special to me.
14. I do not like learning French, because it is difficult.
15. If you have found any difficulties with listening, comprehension or speaking French, please mention them.
16. What advice would you give to your younger brother/sister or friend if he/she started learning French?

B

1. I do not have any special problems pronouncing French.
2. I understand everything said by the teacher or on the tape well.
3. I understand and speak French without using Croatian.
4. If I do not understand something the teacher is saying, I try to understand it without translation.
5. I do not like learning by heart.
6. I usually speak without thinking.
7. I do not think necessary to see the words written to remember them.
8. I remember a story whether I see the pictures or not or draw them myself.
9. Learning poems/songs by heart does not help me to remember words.
10. If I do not know a word when speaking, I try to express myself as best I can.
11. I do not mind making mistakes when speaking.
12. I do not like it if the teacher corrects me when speaking. I try to correct myself.
13. French pronunciation seems something special for me and I like it.
14. In spite of some difficulties I like learning French.

WHAT SORT OF A FRENCH LEARNER AM I?

Questionnaire 2

Reading and writing

A

1. When reading I am not interested in what I am reading.
2. I like reading aloud because of a good pronunciation.
3. When reading I do not think about the end of a story.
4. When reading I do not look at the pictures.
5. When reading I stop at the words I do not understand.
6. When reading I try to understand every word.
7. I want to know the meaning of every word in Croatian.
8. I start writing without thinking beforehand.
9. When writing I try not to make mistakes.
10. When writing I think of the spelling rules I have learnt.
11. When writing I use the words/phrases I have learnt before.
12. I think that writing French correctly and nicely is very difficult.
13. If I do not know how to write a word correctly, I ask somebody or look it up in a dictionary.
14. When I have finished, I read what I have written and correct it if needed.
15. If you have found any other difficulties in reading and writing, please mention them.

B

1. When reading I am interested in what I am reading.
2. I do not like reading aloud because I cannot follow the story.
3. When reading I am interested in the end of a story and I think about it.
4. When reading I like looking at the pictures because they help me to understand the story better.
5. If I do not understand some words when reading, I go on reading.
6. When reading a story it is important to understand it globally.
7. When reading I do not care if I don't understand every word in Croatian.
8. I think before I start writing.
9. The important thing is for me to write even if I make mistakes.
10. When writing I do not think of the spelling rules I have learnt.
11. When writing I do not use the words/phrases I have learnt before.
12. I do not think writing French correctly and nicely is difficult.
13. If I do not know how to write a word correctly I skip it and write another word.
14. When I have finished, I usually do not read what I have written.

There were 71 children (38 boys and 33 girls) evaluated in total. Tables 3 and 4 show the results of their answers.

Table 3: Listening and speaking

A							B						
Q	M - 38		F - 33		T - 71		Q	M - 38		F - 33		T - 71	
		%		%		%			%		%		%
1.	9	23	2	6	11	15	1.	29	76	31	94	60	84
2.	23	60	19	58	42	59	2.	15	39	14	42	29	41
3.	30	79	21	64	51	72	3.	8	21	12	36	20	28
4.	28	74	19	58	47	66	4.	10	26	14	42	24	33
5.	16	42	12	36	28	39	5.	22	58	21	63	43	60
6.	31	82	31	94	62	87	6.	7	18	2	6	9	13
7.	28	73	24	72	52	73	7.	10	26	9	27	19	27
8.	27	71	16	48	43	60	8.	11	29	17	51	28	39
9.	34	89	31	94	65	92	9.	4	10	2	6	6	8
10.	9	23	12	36	21	29	10.	29	76	21	64	50	70
11.	33	87	27	82	60	85	11.	5	13	6	18	11	15
12.	19	50	21	64	40	56	12.	19	50	12	36	31	44
13.	6	16	4	12	10	14	13.	32	84	29	88	61	86
14.	5	13	2	6	7	10	14.	33	87	31	94	64	90

Table 4: Reading and writing

A							B						
Q	M - 38		F - 33		T - 71		Q	M - 38		F - 33		T - 71	
		%		%		%			%		%		%
1.	2	5	0	0	2	3	1.	35	92	33	100	68	96
2.	27	71	29	88	56	79	2.	10	26	4	12	14	20
3.	8	21	2	6	10	14	3.	29	76	31	94	60	85
4.	10	26	3	9	13	18	4.	27	71	30	91	57	80
5.	30	79	24	73	54	76	5.	7	18	9	27	16	23
6.	25	66	25	76	50	70	6.	12	32	8	24	20	28
7.	33	87	28	85	61	86	7.	4	10	5	15	9	13
8.	32	84	32	97	64	90	8.	5	13	1	3	6	8
9.	37	97	31	94	68	96	9.	0	0	2	6	2	3
10.	35	92	31	94	66	93	10.	2	5	2	6	4	6
11.	36	95	32	97	68	96	11.	1	3	1	3	2	3
12.	20	53	15	45	35	49	12.	17	45	18	55	35	49
13.	32	84	30	90	62	87	13.	5	13	3	9	8	11
14.	33	87	28	85	61	86	14.	4	11	5	15	9	13

(The tables 5 and 6 show the results classified by the decreasing order of answers of the A column compared to the B column.)

Analysis of Questionnaire 1

Table 5: Listening and Speaking

No	Q	A	B	Differ.	
1	9	learning by heart	91%	8%	83%
2	6	thinking before speaking	87%	12%	75%
3	11	dislike of mistakes	84%	15%	69%
4	7	need for written words	73%	26%	57%
5	3	MT used for understanding and speaking	71%	28%	43%
6	4	translation in MT of unknown words	66%	33%	33%
7	8	pictures help memorising	60%	39%	21%
8	2	difficulties in understanding	59%	40%	19%
9	12	liking for correction	56%	43%	13%
10	5	learning by heart	39%	60%	
11	10	silence better than mistake	29%	70%	
12	1	problems with pronunciation	15%	84%	
13	13	French pronunciation nothing special	14%	85%	
14	14	dislike of French because of some difficulties	9%	90%	

We were not surprised by the results. They confirmed what we had predicted.

The serialists need learning by heart so that they can use the right word in the right context. Apart from that, all children love rhymes and songs, either in their mother tongue or in a foreign language. Because of their rhythm and rhymes, they help them to acquire a foreign language more easily. They help them to memorise lexical and morpho-syntactical structures too, to create automatisms, but often without knowing their meaning. So it is quite obvious that the Q. 9 was put both by boys and by girls in the first place. The answer to the question 6 came in the second place. We have the feeling that children were not entirely sincere when giving the answer to this question. It seems as if they were repeating what they heard regularly from their parents: *First think and then speak*. Children of that age are very quick in their answers. Their first wish is to participate in the classroom communication more than to think over how to give the right answer. They are still at the age when they want to be the first and the best, to show off in front of their peers. The answer to the Q. 11 comes in third place. The fear or the dislike of a mistake completes the idea expressed in the answer to Q. 6. They want to speak well without making mistakes, but only slightly over 50% of them

(Q. 12) like the teacher to correct them. The answers to questions 3 and 4 which come in fifth and sixth place prove that they use their mother tongue (Croatian) consciously when having problems in speaking. Wishing to understand every detail, they prefer the teacher to translate what they might not understand.

Their need to cope with difficulties and to overcome them is also shown in the answer to Q. 7. They prefer to see a word written to memorise it. They are obviously more visual types than auditiv ones.

The greatest difference between the serialists and the globalists concern their

- deliberate (voluntary) memorising (83%)
- need for reflection before speaking (75%)
- fear of a mistake (69%)
- need of a written word for better memorising (57%)

The globalists put their pleasure in learning French (Q. 14) in first place and they consider it as something special (Q. 13). Consequently they think they have no problems with it (Q. 1). They try to speak the best they can (Q. 10) in spite of the fact that they might lack some words and utterances. They cope with the problems in communicative situations and do not switch to Croatian (Q. 3). They prefer not to be interrupted by the teacher's correction (Q. 12).

Analysing the table we can deduce some strategies that learners of this age use when listening and speaking. The serialists like learning by heart, they need written words for memorising and in understanding and speaking they like translation and use codeswitching. The globalists try to deduce the meaning from global comprehension. In speech production they are adventurous, do not give up but make efforts to communicate in the foreign language.

The last two questions in the questionnaires were open to the children's wish to express their own feelings. Talking about speaking they point out difficulties with pronouncing the nasal sounds and the French *r*. They have problems in understanding long words. If they were asked to give an advice about learning French, most of them point out that French is a beautiful language but very difficult and that learning it one should listen carefully to the teacher in the classroom, do a lot of repeating, reading and practice writing.

Analysis of Questionnaire 2

Table 6: Reading and Writing

No	Q		A	B	Differ.
1-2	9,11	writing without mistakes; use of memorised words/sentences	95%	2%	93%
3	10	writing and thinking on learnt rules	92%	5%	87%
4	8	writing and thinking about the content	90%	8%	82%
5	13	looking for words in a dictionary	87%	11%	76%
6-7	7, 14	need for understanding of every word; final correction when writing	85%	12%	73%
8	2	reading aloud – good pronunciation	78%	19%	59%
9	5	reading and stopping at unknown words	76%	22%	54%
10	6	need for understanding of every word	70%	28%	42%
11	12	writing French is difficult	49%	49%	
12	4	illustrations do not help in reading	18%	80%	
13	3	reading without interest of what follows	14%	84%	
13	1	no interest in the content of a story	2%	95%	

As the table shows, being analytically minded the serialists rank in the first place in their answers writing without mistakes (Q. 9). Therefore they try to remember the words and sentences (Q. 11) and the spelling rules (Q. 10) they have learnt before. If they do not know how to write a word, they look for it in a dictionary (Q. 13). Before writing they make a plan and think what they will write (Q. 8). When reading, they like reading aloud for good pronunciation (Q. 2), practice linear, detailed reading, stopping at unknown words (Q. 5) wanting to know the meaning of every word in Croatian (Q. 7). So they insist on understanding every word (Q. 6). Interestingly enough, both serialists and globalists evaluate equally writing in French (49%). For the former good and correct writing is very difficult while for the latter it is not.

The globalists when reading are interested in the content of a story (Q. 1) They make hypothesis about the end of a story (Q. 3) and like to look at the pictures which help them in understanding the content (Q. 4). They practice global reading (Q. 6) and continue to read even if they do not understand some words (Q. 5). They do not like reading aloud (Q. 2) because it might disturb them in getting the meaning of a story.

The greatest discrimination in points between serialists and globalists (in favour of serialists) concern

- writing well without mistakes (93%)
- using memorised words and utterances (93%)
- reflexion on what was acquired before concerning writing (92%)

In the last question (15) where children could express their own opinion on reading and writing, most of them pointed out the problem of accents. They do not like them, they do not understand their function and therefore they consider they should be omitted. They do not like reading and writing long words especially if they contain difficult letters.

Conclusion

In our opinion this research has provided a lot of material for teachers, teacher trainers and learners to think about. Teachers should adapt their teaching styles to the learners' needs. Children between 4 and 10 love learning by heart, but little by little with years the need to learn by heart will diminish. The same will happen with the need to understand everything and to rely on the mother tongue.

Learners being exposed to L2 for a long period of time acquire different forms of behaviour and their cognitive styles change. So we hope that our little learners will get used to the global way of reasoning, making hypothesis and anticipating the meaning. On the contrary with years their psychological maturity will develop and with it the need for grammatical explanations and logical thinking will increase.

A lot of work will be needed in the domain of writing. The French spelling rules are very difficult for our children. There has been much investigation in this field but probably still not enough. A more cognitive approach should be used in explaining, for example, the functional use of accents. Later more work should be done on creative writing.

The questionnaires should of course be analysed and discussed with learners in the classroom to remind them of the right strategy and technique of learning at the right moment. Self observation and the self awareness are the necessary stages in the process of learning and obviously lead to learner autonomy.

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UČIM FRANCUSKI JEZIK

U članku se opisuje istraživanje provedeno s osnovnoškolskom djecom starom 10 godina koji uče francuski jezik četvrtu godinu prema eksperimentalnom programu R Hrvatske. S obzirom na kognitivni pristup učenju jezika u suvremenoj metodi nastave stranih jezika već se i u ovoj dobi može razvijati jezična svijest te proučavati način na koji se primaju, organiziraju i procesiraju obavijesti pri usvajanju stranoga jezika. Dva upitnika o slušanju i govoru i o pisanju i čitanju poslužila su kako bi se ispitali načini i strategije koje učenici te dobi koriste na satu francuskoga jezika. Postignuti rezultati vrijedan su materijal koji može poslužiti učiteljima kao putokaz pri analizi strategija učenja a istodobno će doprinijeti razvijanju učenikova samopromatranja, samovrednovanja te u krajnjoj konsekvenci i učenikove samostalnosti.