

## Young Learners Discover Their Learning Strategies

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A 10 year-old child can develop partial language awareness of the foreign language he/she is learning. The study presents the results of interviews following a test in reading and writing. With this procedure children have an opportunity to evaluate their own performance and, in so doing, are taught how to control the learning process. This leads to learner autonomy.

An examination of research literature on learners' autonomy reveals the role of conscious awareness in acquisition in the classroom environment more specifically. The question arises if a certain level of conscious awareness facilitates foreign language acquisition and learning (Harley, 1994). It has been suggested that reflection on linguistic output and use of explicit techniques helps learners, even young learners, to note some aspects of the target language and the way the language is used. Learners' awareness implies a positive effect on their system of learning. Such procedures in the classroom are interesting and useful from two perspectives. On the one hand they provide teachers with important information on the learners' ways of learning and their linguistic behaviour when solving a problem. On the other hand they give learners the opportunity to reflect on their learning styles as well as provide them with information about the learning process in general. The more they discover about learning a foreign language, the better they will be in managing their own learning. In this way, attitudes towards foreign language learning can be shaped.

Some researchers point out the difference between language awareness and consciousness-raising in foreign language learning (Sharwood Smith 1995). Language awareness provides the means by which things can be learned about how the language works. It induces the speaker of a foreign language to become conscious of his/her own use of language. It also implies the ability to talk explicitly about the language forms and use. Consciousness-raising helps to explain what is happening inside the learners' minds and how they develop various aspects of language ability (Sharwood Smith 1995).

Whenever possible, in formal classroom contexts learners should be given the opportunity to reflect on their performances. Such a procedure provides researchers with an important insight into learners' cognitive operations during foreign language learning. The collected information offers interesting data on learning strategies. They also indicate the learner's capacity to reflect on his/her language behaviour and the autonomous way in which production is observed and then evaluated. In this way there is a direct relation between language learning and language use. This implies the development of communicative competence and the development of learner's strategic control. In Widdowson's more recent formulation competence is defined as having two components (1983a cited in Little 1996:14)

"competence has two components: knowledge and ability, and (...) these in principle relate to all four of Hymes' parameters (possibility, feasibility, appropriateness, performance) which in turn can be reformulated as grammatical competence (the parameter of possibility) on the one hand, and pragmatic competence (all the other parameters) on the other."

According to this formulation it is clear that the speaker has to possess not only the knowledge of the target language system but also the ability to use the language appropriately in a certain situation and with a certain speaker to achieve his communicative goal and to perform properly.

Competence, defined in this way, enables the researcher to make a clear distinction between grammatical and pragmatic competence. In the environment of the classroom the pragmatic competence comes into use most often when the learner has "to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale and Swain 1980:30 cited in Little 1996:14). In this way strategic competence is seen as the capacity to use communicative strategies in order to compensate for a lack of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. As we have pointed out, reflection on language production establishes the relation between language learning and language use. The same could apply to the association between the development of the learner's strategic competence and his/her strategic control of the learning process. For the last fifteen years, control of the learning process has been a great preoccupation in research on communicative strategies. Thus communicative strategies are described in different ways by different researchers. We have used the description of Faerch and Kasper (1983:36). They treat them as a psycholinguistic process:

"...communicative strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal."

Defined like that the communicative strategy can be considered as learner's behaviour when faced with a problem. In such a situation a learner can either adopt avoidance behaviour and use reduction strategies (changing the task most often) or achievement behaviour. By doing that he/she attempts to solve the problem by developing an alterna-

tive plan. The strategies that are discussed in this paper relate to the problems in the execution phase. We decided to investigate learners' strategic competence in written performances. In support of the idea about consciousness-raising in learners, we induced our learners to talk about what they were doing and what their intentions were when solving problems. In our opinion the introspection on the use of communication strategies after learners' written output is necessary even with young learners in order to develop an interest in what is happening when using a foreign language to accomplish a certain task. Thus, language acquisition becomes more efficient and the learning more individualised. The learners must be given tools to become autonomous. The communication strategies, conscious or unconscious, contribute to the development of effective learning strategies.

"...it seems to be a general rule that human beings perform best when they know what they are meant to be doing, why they are meant to be doing it, and by what means they are most likely to do it successfully." (Little and Singleton 1990:19)

Linked to the child's cognitive growth there is, according to some authors, a difference between language awareness and metalinguistic consciousness.

"...language awareness is the outcome of mere cognitive maturation, metalinguistic consciousness appears to be the intended effect of formal education or systematic instruction, mainly through the teaching of grammar. The former may be present already in the young child, even before schooling; but later is acquired on an advanced level of formal schooling, usually about the age of 12-13 years." (Wittwer cited in Titone 1993:85)

Evidently various explanations of language awareness and linguistic consciousness in learners of different ages are available. Our assumption was that our young learners in a formal educational setting were capable of reflecting on their linguistic (written) output and talking explicitly about their language use when solving a problem.

In our curriculum the first years of teaching/learning are devoted mostly to the spoken language while reading and writing are introduced in the second year when spelling in the mother tongue is mastered. Reading and writing skills are introduced in the classroom gradually starting with simple exercises like copying parts of words, sentences or matching parts of utterances. Subsequently, progression is made to more creative ones like: reading short texts and answering comprehension questions, to writing a short composition which gives learners the possibility to produce more individualised and personalised types of written performances.

### **Study-aim**

We were interested in finding out if young learners were capable of developing linguistic consciousness to a certain degree when evaluating their written performances. Ten and eleven year-old learners of French included in the Croatian early foreign lan-

guage learning project<sup>1</sup> were tested to determine levels of their linguistic consciousness and the use of strategic competence. They were tested after five years of studying French (approximately 700 hours). We were mostly interested in whether the learners of this age possess a certain ability to reflect on their language use when asked to talk explicitly about the strategies employed to overcome problems in solving individual items of the test.

### **Instrument**

The test used to evaluate the written performance was composed of 9 different exercises ranging from very simple to more complex and creative ones. In the first 3 exercises the learners were asked to match two parts of words cut in two, to cross out the odd man, to find the opposite meaning of a word, while in the following two exercises (in the form of a dialogue) they had to find the appropriate answer to a question. In these exercises all the linguistic elements were given, so the learners just had to produce the correct answer thus showing that they had mastered the basic strategy of reading comprehension and that they had carefully read the proposed items. From the sixth exercise onwards the learners were exposed to more difficult exercises demanding more attention to reading. Where writing was concerned, some items offered them the possibility to include something personal, something familiar that they had learned before and some imaginative and creative elements. This would confirm their ability to use previously acquired knowledge.

The exercises of that sort in our test were exemplified by exercises 6 - 9. In the sixth exercise the learners had to read the story and in response to some statements to put a cross under Yes or No thus confirming the comprehension of a story. Then there was a story (the seventh exercise) where the learners had to fill in the gaps with the given words. The last two exercises were more communicative ones. In them the learners had to read an advertisement in which a French boy was looking for a pen pal, and they had to answer it by introducing themselves in the same way the boy did. Finally, the ninth exercise included a letter written by a French girl who has detailed questions for her Croat pen pal about her forthcoming holiday in Croatia. The learners had to write a short reply to the letter in which they were required to answer all of her questions.

Our hypothesis from the beginning was that children of that age were capable of reflecting on their productions and of developing some kind of language awareness when describing the strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1991 early foreign language learning was introduced into 12 primary schools in Zagreb. 6-year-old children started to learn French, English, German or Italian through five periods of a foreign language weekly. The foreign language was also used in teaching mathematics, science, singing, drawing and physical training. Along the years the project spread to several towns inland and on the coast.

## Method

We tested 74 learners aged 10 - 11. When the tests were corrected we applied two sorts of introspection. One was discussion in the classroom with the teacher and the other consisted of individual interviews with a group of learners (about a third of the total number).

Both in the first as well as in the second approach the learners were asked to comment, either collectively or individually, on their written production: the mistakes they made, the way they produced small compositions (the creative writing) explaining at the same time what they did and how they behaved when answering each item of the test. And when they had to resolve some problem, what were the strategies they used to answer the question, to accomplish the task the best they could.

## Results and discussion

The obtained results have been ranked according to the learners' merit in each exercise.

No. of exerc.	Max. possible points	No. of learners	Results in ranking order
I.	6	59 (80.23%)	1. - V.
II.	5	38 (50.51%)	2. - IV.
III.	4	13 (18.71%)	3. - I.
IV.	4	61 (90.26%)	4. - II.
V.	7	69 (92.99%)	5. - VI.
VI.	6	63 (44.26%)	6. - VIII.
VII.	5	10 (15.26%)	7. - III.
VIII.	10	47 (42.4%)	8. - VII.
IX	7	5 (6.38%)	9. - IX.

As it can be seen the best results were obtained in the fifth, fourth, first and second exercises, in which all the linguistic elements were provided for the learners. When the method of introspection on the language use was applied we were not surprised to see that most of the pupils were capable of commenting on their performances.

We were pleased that learners did well in exercises V. and IV. (first and second place respectively) with the communicative outlook. The learners commented that they liked the sort of exercise where all the elements are given. They considered the task to be easy because they understood what was required. Clearly, they had acquired all the communicative functions which were required in the exercises. If they did not understand an utterance they returned to the item at the end. In such a case they applied the *strategy of elimination*.

The first exercise with words cut in two, which we thought would be rather easy, was third in rank. The learners were not able to get good results because some of them could not decode the unfamiliar words. When they matched incorrectly, they explained that the word sounded French. Thus they resorted to the *strategy of word coinage* rather than abandoning the task.

According to the learners, they encountered difficulties each time the word was unknown to them. They concluded that they should improve their vocabulary.

The second exercise was fourth in rank. The given words were thought to be part of the learners' acquired vocabulary. When commenting on their mistakes, the learners pointed out that the difficulties to cross out the odd man arose because they did not know the meaning of some words.

The sixth exercise included a short text reading and then responding to statements about the reading by choosing the answer Yes or No. This exercise ranked fifth and presented difficulties to some learners. They pointed out that they had problems in understanding particular words and subsequently the meaning of the whole text. Some of them thought that they were not able to complete the exercise due to fast and inattentive reading so the meaning of the whole text was lost.

The eighth exercise was in sixth place. Learners had to fill in the gaps of a text with the given words. The text was the story of Three Little Pigs. The learners reported that they liked the exercise very much and were able to complete it quickly and easily. They pointed out that it was pleasurable to do this exercise, because they were familiar with the story from their mother tongue and from French lessons. When they did not know the meaning of a word, they resorted to the *strategy of elimination*, that is, they first filled out the gaps with words they knew and then guessed the rest of the gaps.

Surprisingly the third item considered by us as rather easy was seventh in rank. The learners had difficulties in finding the opposite meaning of a given word. When trying to solve the problem they resorted to the *strategy of generalisation*. In their comments they pointed out that they understood most of the words but did not know the antonyms. For these, they unconsciously created a new word by analogy to the given word. The new word sounded French to them or had a French appearance, as for example: *la porte est fermée - la porte est \*ouvrée* or *\*la porte est ouvrete* (the *strategy of word coinage*).

The worst results (the last two ranks) were found in the seventh and ninth exercises. It was hoped that the written production would reflect some personal elements. In the seventh exercise the learners were asked to respond to an advertisement. They were required to introduce themselves. They made a lot of spelling mistakes claiming that the exercise was too difficult. The exercise was a pretext for creative and personalised writing. The poor learners did not show any attempt of independent writing in their compositions. They mostly copied elements from the model; but in doing so they even made spelling mistakes. The better learners stated that they had their own ideas about what to write, what to add, what comments to make, but unfortunately did not know how to spell the words. They were aware of their lexical weaknesses. Thus they abandoned the

exercise. Evidently, spelling was the greatest problem in this exercise and prevented the learners from producing a more detailed and creative writing.

The ninth exercise was last in rank. The aim of the exercise was to make the learners write a response to a letter according to a given plan. Evaluating the written productions was not an easy task. Better learners showed the need to write something personal and creative but lacked linguistic elements. When doing so, they produced a lot of spelling mistakes that gave them a low rating. The clever ones achieved the goal of the exercise by copying a lot from the model - thus producing correctly spelled words, but less personal items. In this way they earned rather a lot of points for the exercise. When reflecting on their written output they stated that they felt annoyed because of their lack of lexical knowledge and unfamiliarity with spelling rules. In their comments, the learners pointed out the disadvantages of the exercise. In their opinion, it was the most difficult exercise and they asked why it came at the end of the test when they were tired and their levels of concentration were low. Surprisingly enough, while correcting the test with the teacher, most of them were able to apply the technique of self-correction for quite a lot of mistakes. They partially explained their failure by claiming that the sentences of the model letter were too long, which made comprehension more difficult.

Our results concerning strategic competence show that our young learners have succeeded in self-reflection when analysing their written output and were capable of reasoning about their linguistic knowledge.

The best results were obtained in simple exercises where all the elements were given. Pleased with such results, the learners expressed positive attitudes towards them considering such exercises as easy and motivating. They attributed their **good results** to the following:

- they understood all the words,
- the content aspect of the exercise was familiar to them.

Accordingly, it seems that learners of that age perform better in familiar contexts with linguistic elements that they have already acquired. Interestingly, when faced with a problem, for example, when a linguistic element is missing, they in most cases do not abandon the task but try to solve it.

Likewise, they attributed their *poor results* in the more communicative exercises to the following:

- they did not understand all the words of some texts and could not do the exercises properly, or they did not understand the instructions of some exercises,
- when they wanted to use some new words that would illustrate their potential of creativity, they were unable to do so because they did not know how to spell the word. They also commented that they had acquired many more words at the oral but not at the writing level. They rarely use words that they are uncertain of because they fear the teacher's criticism of a misspelled word.

The error analysis revealed that learners sometimes resort to the strategy of generalisation. In the exercise where opposite meanings were required, the learners did not know how to form the opposite of (*la porte est*) *fermé*. So by analogy they produced

\**ouvert* (la porte est \**ouverte*), or \**ouvrit* similar probably to *sorti*, *parti*, *fini*, or \**ouverte* (similar in pronunciation to \**ouverte*).

The *strategy of semantic avoidance* was found in the exercise on opposite meanings when a learner produced *je n'ai pas froid* instead of *j'ai chaud*.

As stated before the learners often used the *strategy of elimination*, starting with the familiar items to solve the problem; they also used the *strategy of selecting elements from the model*, in this way compensating for insufficient linguistic competence.

## Conclusion

Our study on young learners' use of strategies has revealed some interesting findings. As far as the young FL learners are concerned the results indicate that most learners try to achieve the task. For them, it is better to produce - even if it is incorrect, than to avoid the problem. Undoubtedly, learners of this age prefer to show off and to impress the audience rather than fail or reveal that they are incompetent.

As far as the introspective method on problem solving is concerned consciousness of mental operations can, in our opinion, be useful both for the learner and for the teachers. It is important for learners to know what they are doing, how they are organising their production and evaluating it. This is one of the ways in which we can help them explore their own learning approach, how to learn to learn and how to become responsible for their learning. The learners' reflection on their learning styles provides teachers with important information on the ways learners become conscious of the task, how they manage and evaluate their learning. The teaching methodologies in the classroom should follow these principles to make the instruction more individualised.

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## MALI UČENICI OTKRIVAJU SVOJE STRATEGIJE UČENJA

Učenici stari deset godina mogu djelomično razviti jezičnu osjetljivost o stranom jeziku koji uče. U članku se opisuju rezultati istraživanja provedenih s pomoću intervjua nakon što su učenici završili testove čitanja i pisanja. Tim su postupkom imali prilike sami vrednovati svoje jezične proizvode pa se na taj način pokušalo učenike naučiti kako mogu kontrolirati proces učenja. Takvi postupci vode učenika prema samostalnosti.

