YOUNG LEARNERS' CONTRIBUTION
TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The paper presents the results obtained from a research on vocabulary learning strategies employed by young Polish beginners learning English in the primary context; it provides a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the findings and concludes with pedagogical suggestions.

1. Introduction

Contemporary language teaching methodology considers vocabulary to be the most important aspect of foreign language learning. Consequently, among other things it has been widely acknowledged that foreign language students can be effectively trained in using a number of learning strategies which they subsequently use intentionally. This has been documented in a number of studies (e.g. Droździał-Szelest 1977; Zybert 2001). On the other hand, teachers also observe that students commonly use various strategies without prior training, not even being aware of the fact. They do so because they "do not come to the classroom empty-handed. They bring with them an already established set of instincts, skills and characteristics, which will help them learn another language" (Halliwell, 1998: 3). What strategies untrained learners actually employ depends on a number of individual differences. However, two seem to be crucial for using strategies, namely their age and proficiency level. It seems obvious that age determines the degree of practical experience in formal learning the learner has attained and this, in consequence, enables him to attempt to discover, practically subconsciously, his individual ways of effective learning. If this is so, it should be clear that with age older learners become more experienced. Thus, it is expected that they use more strategies than younger ones. In turn, the learning experience will result in greater self-confidence, which leads to greater complexity of their strategies and increased flexibility in using them. This is why

they surpass young beginning level students who are less developed cognitively (Komorowska, 1999). Since these young students have been less researched, in consequence, the research presented in the paper was devoted to school learners of English, who are of special concern in the present-day educational policy in Poland.

2. Objectives

The title of the paper explicitly implies that strategies are used by learners naturally and impulsively in language learning. It is evident that they do this to facilitate learning and that it is most conspicuous in the case of vocabulary learning. Since it is not apparent what strategies are used by learners untrained in strategy use of their own accord this study aims to identify the range of strategies these students employ dependent on the two stable factors mentioned above: their age and proficiency level.

The major purpose of the research was thus to show that language learners employ vocabulary learning strategies spontaneously, i.e. without receiving any prior training in their use. However, the focus here is on the young beginning level learners as recognition of the strategies used by them naturally should be of particular importance and interest to teachers. Secondly, the wish to explore the query to obtain plausible results seems worth pursuing: on the one hand, the findings can endow language teachers with a clearer insight into why some young learners are more effective than others and, on the other, the identification of their strategies should help teachers to efficiently direct and supervise both poor and good students and then, ultimately, train them accordingly adopting an individualized stance in teaching. With these objectives in mind the main intention (though, admittedly, limited in scope) of the following research was to recognize the range of vocabulary learning strategies (henceforth, VLSs) that young beginners characteristically use naturally in the formal setting with the view of likely adopting/adapting them for pedagogical purposes.[1]

Additionally, it needs to be mentioned that the investigation purposefully disregarded the distinction between the use of strategies in the classroom and outside of it – this decision was based on the fact that the subjects were exposed to the foreign language only in formal situations and learned it solely in the classroom and at home but did not engage in functional language use outside of these two settings due to their overall insufficient competence and resources.

3. Subjects

The research was conducted on school learners of English at the beginning of the 2009/10 school year.[2]

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[1] It is assumed that the significance of vocabulary for the development of communicative competence is clear and does not require any argumentation.

[2] I am indebted to my in-service MA students for helping me to collect data.

The sample consisted of 380 students (198 girls and 182 boys) of 9 years of age. They were all native speakers of Polish, categorized as English beginners even though they had just started their third year of learning the language[3] in different primary schools in central and eastern Poland. In spite of approximately 144 hours of previous instruction, they were estimated as having little proficiency in English. It is important to note that the groups were carefully selected, the criterion being the learners' unfamiliarity with the idea of language learning strategy – during their first two years of learning English the pupils were taught by teachers other than by those who taught them in their third year, i.e. when the research was being conducted. Until that time the subjects had not been trained in strategy use nor even had an idea of what a learning strategy could be. It was these new teachers that took care of distributing and collecting the research instrument for scrutiny. As they were vocationally qualified they started training their students in using language learning strategies after the investigation and reported that students welcomed the training with considerable enthusiasm, especially that many of them became aware that they actually were already employing a number of them.

4. Instrument

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire designed to investigate the appointed students and was administered to them in Polish. It was constructed after first surveying a representative group of students: 34 pupils, all young beginners. The pilot study showed that even though the term "strategy" was not used in it, the students' answers demonstrated clearly that they actually did use a number of strategies. They were asked to report on their use of "knacks" in learning words by answering the plain and easy question: "What do you do to learn a new English word that you hear or encounter in a text?" Admittedly, a few students stated that they did not know or did not use any special ways of learning words. However, the remaining majority provided relevant answers and these were utilized to extrapolate vocabulary learning strategies that they actually employed. This was based on 947 instances of VLS used. After a careful examination of the questionnaire respective strategies were identified among the students' answers and included in the questionnaires used in the research proper.

For the sample fifteen different strategies were discerned; however, four were unclear, difficult to classify and so sporadic that, in consequence, they were disregarded and excluded from the research instrument. The remaining eleven were selected and included in the Questionnaire that was used to scrutinize the students participating in the research. The subjects' answers served as data for subsequent analysis.

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[3] The amount of their exposure to the language prior to the research was on average n? hours.

Ultimately, this questionnaire related to the following distinct strategies:

Question no.	Strategy	Description
1	Imagery	Using a mental or real picture to grasp/remember the meaning of word
2	Grouping	Putting words into families according to their lexical relations
3	Inferencing	Making use of current L2 linguistic knowledge to guess the meaning of word and/or hypothesizing on its meaning due to its formal similarity to L1 word
4	Resourcing	Obtaining lexical information from reference materials
5	Memorizing	Rote learning of form and meaning of word
6	Translating	Matching/associating the meaning of L1 word to/with L2 equivalent
7	Repeating	Mimicking/rehearsing word uttered by model (aloud or silently)
8	Glossing[4]	Keeping own glossary; writing down words in exercise-book or special notebook, highlighting them in text with or without translation into L1
9	Consulting teacher	Asking for clarification
10	Consulting peers	Asking for confirmation/clarification (reviewing with classmate)
11	Monitoring	Checking/controlling own understanding/use of word

Note that even though items 9 and 10 in the above list belong to the same category of social strategy, they were deliberately distinguished to find whether nine year olds were equally predisposed to turn for help to the two different sources.

The questionnaires (see Appendix) was designed with the intention to obtain information about the students' frequency of use of the particular strategies on four dimensions, namely: always – often – sometimes – never. Their indications were meant to recognize the strategies they actually do employ and with what intensity.

5. Findings (the figures are provided in percentage points (%))

		always	often	sometimes	never
1	Imagery	26	34	26	14
2	Grouping	26	52	12	10
3	Inferencing	46	30	10	14
4	Resourcing	57	17	21	5
5	Memorizing	72	20	4	4
6	Translating	65	33	2	0
7	Repeating	46	42	6	6
8	Glossing	32	53	10	5
9	Consulting teacher	6	8	27	59
10	Consulting peers	20	38	28	14
11	Self-monitoring	22	31	18	29

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[4] This strategy refers to not-taking and actually includes what I have called *learner glossing* and described in detail elsewhere (cf. Zybert 2005).

6. Analysis and discussion

It is interesting to note that in the preliminary survey the subjects mentioned only one vocabulary learning behaviour which was identified as a metacognitive strategy[5] (self-monitoring) and only one that matched a social strategy (consulting others).[6] This finding supports the claim that age is a factor that determines the use of a type of strategy – the fact that only one metacognitive strategy was used shows that youngsters' cognitive abilities are still inadequate to cope with leaning problems; yet, the relatively high frequency of use of this strategy is ascribed to the learners' low confidence in their linguistic abilities; on the other hand, the relatively low use of social strategies proves that young learners need to rely on others' assistance to make learning processes more effective. The remaining learning behaviours matched cognitive strategies; the prevailing use of this type of strategy is attributed to the fact that the survey was geared explicitly at learning lexis and also matched up the students' proficiency level and age.

The findings indicate that the most popular strategies among young beginners are: memorizing, translating, resourcing and repeating, respectively. Also classroom observation shows that memorizing and repeating (both memory strategies) are habitually employed by youngsters, who have scanty metacognitive capabilities and rely on rote learning and repeating (to remember), which they have been used to doing since very early in childhood, especially if they attended kindergartens. The high rank of resourcing is somewhat unexpected but suggests that these learners must already be quite self-reliant (autonomous?). They may have developed the trait in the process of their general education and home upbringing which apparently promoted initiative and creativity. The high figure for inferencing is quite surprising since it actually requires quite a lot of cognitive effort on the part of young learners and rather/somehow contradicts their memory orientation.

The surprisingly low use of strategy 9 (consulting teacher) is presumably tied to learners' motivation, anxiety and attitude. Young learners' motivation for learning anything usually stems from their desire to please the teacher; however, they also fear that that their frequent questions and confirmation / clarification checks can be taken for their incompetence and can spoil the positive image that the teacher may have of them. Thus, in order to save a positive face their fear creates anxiety and strong reservations, which is a kind of tactic in an attempt to preserve the teacher's favour. On the other hand, the low rank of this strategy can just as well derive from the learners' introvert predisposition or his from attitude towards the teacher whose poor rapport with the class can clearly demotivate learners and withdraw their interest in learning.

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[5] Metacognition involves conscious thinking of one's own learning processes and achievement.

[6] O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 120) enumerate one more social strategy (cooperation); a plausible explanation of the fact that the surveyed subjects did use it can logically be attributed to their young age.

A few implications seem to have emerged from the above study. First, beginning level students do use some vocabulary learning strategies quite spontaneously even if they do not realize this; second, although they use rather few of these strategies they still have a weighty potential for learning them as reported by teachers, who notice students' eagerness to be trained in using them; third, in line with the preceding remark students can greatly benefit from conscious and intentional use of strategies – this, however, has not emerged from the study but has been proved by a number of other, well known studies.

7. Conclusions

Further research is needed to find whether the VLSs used by the researched sample are typical of Polish beginners; it may be that learners-beginners in other educational systems or traditions and of different cultural background use different strategies.

Interestingly/surprisingly and contrary to claims maintained in literature relating strategy use to proficiency level the present findings show that beginners use not only fewer strategies in general but also fewer metacognitive strategies (in fact, only one) than more advanced students do (cf., e.g. O'Malley and Chamot 1990: 118). It is thus concluded that beginning level students (at any rate, young ones) use overall relatively few strategies.

It is hoped that teachers who instruct young beginners can obtain some insight into their students' potential with relation to vocabulary learning strategies they use. The findings can be exploited in the actual teaching practice to encourage strategy training in the classroom to the satisfaction of both learners and teachers.

References

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Appendix (the English version of the questionnaire administered to the subjects in their L1)

To each statement indicate your answer:

1. I visualize the meaning of the word (imagine, draw a simple picture, link it with a real object, act, event,
always – often – sometimes – never

2. I group words that look alike (are similar in form), are related in a way, refer to similar ideas or fields
always – often – sometimes – never

3. I try to guess the meaning of a word using my knowledge of English grammar and/or by relating it to a Polish word
always – often – sometimes – never

4. I check the meaning/use of words in dictionaries, pay attention to them when heard/seen in the media
always – often – sometimes – never

5. I learn words by heart
always – often – sometimes – never

6. I translate English words into Polish equivalents
always – often – sometimes – never

7. I pronounce/rehearse silently words said by teacher or spoken on TV (I imitate the speaker)
always – often – sometimes – never

8. I keep my own glossary; write down all words in my exercise-book or a special notebook; I highlight them in the text
always – often – sometimes – never

9. I ask the teacher to provide information about unfamiliar words
always – often – sometimes – never

10. I ask peers to confirm my understanding of words and/or clarify their meaning and use
always – often – sometimes – never

11. I check/control my understanding of difficult words when I hear or read or use them
always – often – sometimes – never