



On Some Aspects of Developing Cognitive Strategies

Eva Smetanová

eva.smetanova@ucm.sk

University of Ss Cyril and Methodius (Slovak Republic)

Abstract

In the present days, experts discuss some of the key elements that take place in the process of education: particularly whether it is more important to focus on information transfer or on training and developing abilities and skills of our students. That is to say that if we offer our students certain strategies or instructions how to solve a problem only within a particular area, a question of transfer may arise: the students often have difficulties to transmit techniques and strategies adopted for a certain domain from one to another – even though a similar domain. The solution could be to let the teacher introduce and develop individual strategies and to explain when to use them. It means that teachers show their students many similar tasks that help the students develop and expand the methods, techniques and strategies that they have acquired. The teachers also clarify why to choose a particular strategy for a certain domain. We assume that by adopting such a model the students therefore, will be able to solve problems in the future in an independent and accurate way.

The paper offers a brief introduction to the field of cognitive strategies. It attempts to identify those that are used most often when acquiring a foreign language and to present some techniques that teachers may find useful in order to help their students adopt a new language. The aim of the paper is to inspire present and future teachers of foreign languages and therefore to increase the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and learning.

Those who know no foreign language know nothing of their mother tongue. (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

The more languages you know, the more of a person (human) you are. (Czech proverb)

Many people suppose that there is nothing left to learn for the students who enter university when having already some knowledge of a foreign language. They believe a couple of years spent abroad or all the years of primary and secondary school studies dedicated to a foreign language must be “enough” for them; therefore university students have not much to develop and practice. However, to study a foreign language does not mean only to be familiar with its grammar system or vocabulary. Let us have a look at some of the aspects that are developed and extended thanks to intentional foreign language acquisition during learners' university studies.

- Fluency development - upper intermediate and advanced students understand a foreign language quite sufficiently - nevertheless, if they have not many opportunities to speak the language, their spoken fluency could often be a minefield. That is why university teachers attempt to create friendly working environment where students may present their opinions, express their ideas and emotions in a foreign language without being criticised or punished and therefore gain confidence in using the language in a natural way.
- Specific vocabulary expansion – a foreign language does not consist only of general social phrases and word expressions. Tertiary education provides the student with vocabulary related to various professional, scientific and academic areas. Specific terminology is not only explained and determined but also practised and used in various contexts so that learners get an idea how (the form) the word is supposed to be used and where (the situation) and when (the circumstances) it would be appropriate to choose it.
- Academic knowledge about a foreign language – learner's education is enlarged by various linguistic disciplines. Seminars and lectures on linguistics offer a brief outline of the history and



development of a foreign language, its phonetics and phonology, syntax and morphology of the language and also its comparison with a structure of the learner's mother tongue.

- Academic education in a foreign language – the learner gains competence and ability to use foreign language terminology for a certain domain. He/she tackles areas of studies such as business, tourism, science and technology, law, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, translating and interpreting. Many courses offer training and developing language skills such as academic and creative writing, reading and listening with comprehension. Literary studies give information on literary theory, text analyses, literary criticism.
- Special skills development - during seminars and lectures, learners are involved in activities that help develop skills such as *critical thinking* - learners need to know how to make analysis, formulate conclusions, present arguments and express their own opinions. To be able to do it in a foreign language is even more difficult and rather essential in our everyday lives. Therefore students are supposed to be given the space and opportunity to practise it in the classroom. *Self-discipline* plays a crucial role in foreign language acquisition. It does not develop naturally, learners must be shown that self-organising means for example being able to plan their studies properly as well as being able to keep to the plan; to be patient enough to continue despite a temporary failure or a slow progress. University teachers also help students set achievable and meaningful goals that suit their level, age and needs as well as train them to *identify and develop strategies* to reach the goals. Students need to be given time and space to reflect on what they have learnt and integrate it with the information they are already familiar with; they have to realize not only what they are acquiring but also how they are doing it – that is to *analyse their own learning strategies*.
- Multicultural awareness and personality activation - there are also disciplines related to historical, geographical or cultural facts of certain foreign-language speaking countries. Such information may advance the student's multicultural awareness and opinions; he/she becomes conscious of some differences or may start searching for similarities within other cultures and countries. Thus the student deepens his or her knowledge on his/her own culture and home country. Penetrating the nature of a foreign language - its stylistics, syntax, lexis, pronunciation, or lexicography helps the student understand his/her mother tongue better, choose more accurate vocabulary and formulate sentences in the mother tongue as well as in a foreign language. The ability to receive news (read or heard) in a foreign language contributes and makes the student be better informed; the possibility to read or watch a film in an original language is undoubtedly a higher cultural experience; to travel and be able to communicate with local people may represent fulfilment of one's hobbies. Therefore we can say that a foreign language education helps form the learner's personality and extends his/her own potential.

Intentional foreign language acquisition influences and develops also cognitive competencies (strategies) of the student. Cognitive strategies as described by Rebecca Oxford (1990, p. 8) concern the way the student thinks about his/her learning. They involve many ways of using effectively all the cognitive processes and substituting missing knowledge. Cognitive behaviour is typical for more or less - observable techniques and strategies. Cognitive strategies are connected to intellectual abilities and skills – that means to a cognitive domain and influence the quality of the student's learning [1]. Having in mind foreign language acquisition, we may introduce some of them:

- Learning a foreign language encourages the **development of verbal skills** – the student must be able to express his ideas verbally: thus the student should select appropriate vocabulary, he/she should use a correct grammar structure and tense; it is important to choose a style and register (formal or informal) that would suit the situation. The students should also think of the pace/tempo he is going to use while speaking, the tone of the voice, speech power, pronunciation. He/she must know and recognise what part of the speech is going to be stressed, and many other aspects.
- Learning a foreign language exercises **short-term and long-term memory** – learning a foreign language is about remembering – and intentional repetition and revising is often



needed. This is the way the student trains his/her memory, either a short-term one (for example when learning to pass a test) or a long-term memory (when the information is stored and used any time in the future).

- The student may be put at risk that he/she could not understand everything that has been said. This also affects the student's cognitive side – he/she learns how to **presume the meaning of unknown words**. The student should realize what context the unknown word appears in, what meaning or connotation it may convey (positive, negative, rude, emotional, etc.), or if he/she can understand the text without being able to identify the unknown word.
- In order to develop the learner's cognitive domain the student learns how to **listen and read with comprehension**, how to **take notes**; how to **search for key words** in a text. An individual approach needs to be implemented here – everyone has got his/her own preferences. There are students who highlight important words/sentences in a text, there are some who make their own comments while reading/listening to a text or use certain symbols that represent their attitude, emotions or opinions.
- When students learn new information, they try to connect it with something they already know or are familiar with – they **make associations** – which help them understand and also remember it better. They often **visualise** a new word/situation/fact and compare it with the picture they already had in their mind.
- While studying a foreign language, one should be able to **summarise** of what has been said or read or heard and to **identify the main idea** or message. During a description, they may be asked to use a lot of **creativity and imagination**, some other time **accurate reproduction** is required.

All of the cognitive strategies mentioned support an intentional manipulation with a language and are different from other types of learning strategies. They should be active during the whole process of acquisition and they are also very closely connected to people's intelligence – that is why when cognitive strategies are being developed, talent and intelligence is cultivated, too. We, however, have in mind Gardner's multiple intelligences that are not associated with the IQ level. Howard Gardner (1995) [2] offers his division of eight types of intelligences:

- Linguistic intelligence – when the student is excellent in oral and written communication and uses his language accurately and appropriately.
- Logical-Mathematical intelligence – the student is good at comparing and combining events, facts; he/she can analyse and decode rules and apply definitions.
- Visual-Spatial intelligence – the student uses visual stimuli, mind mapping, schemes, tables, charts and pictures to help him/her remember or understand.
- Kinaesthetic intelligence – the student likes role plays, simulations, he/she often uses non-verbal communication (gestures, body language, mimics, facial expressions, etc.).
- Interpersonal intelligence – the student prefers working in groups or pairs, he/she tries to find solutions in problem-solving tasks and needs an immediate feedback.
- Intrapersonal intelligence - the student prefers individual work, he or she can organise his/her studies effectively, he or she could be very critical when evaluating his/her own work.
- Musical intelligence – when learning a foreign language, it is essential to catch and imitate the melody of the language, its pitch, rhythm, intonation.
- Naturalistic intelligence – the student can remember most when being directly in natural environment or when doing research and experiments.

Although Gardner's intelligence types are introduced individually, they are interconnected and overlapped. When teachers underestimate or neglect them, the learner may lose his/her chance to be successful by showing his/her strengths and potential. Foreign language acquisition is a demanding



and life-long process. It does not only enable us to communicate, to express ourselves and to understand the others. Whether we are beginners or we can speak a foreign language fluently, its learning offers us much more: it affects our personalities in a positive way and it touches both our emotional and cognitive sides. Students who enter universities in order to study a foreign language often gain more than just language knowledge. In order to strengthen the students' language competencies, teachers attempt to help develop their learning techniques and cognitive strategies by setting various tasks and asking for different solutions. As the student could deal with many similar tasks in the future, he/she should be trained to what technique is best to use and how to do it. That is why the way the student comes to the conclusion is often more important than the result (answer) itself. As Sirotová (2010, p. 167) states, theoretical knowledge acquisition is for the student important only when he/she is able to apply the knowledge further. That means not only during his/her university studies but mostly in his/her practical life. The best training to apply theoretical knowledge is to solve model situations adapted from real life [3].

To sum up we would like to repeat the key aspects of our paper: cognitive strategies in a (foreign) language are tight to intellectual abilities and skills – that is the student's cognitive domain – and significantly influence the quality of learning. It is very important to make sure they are particularly active while acquiring a foreign language in order to make this process effective. We believe our topic has inspired present and future teachers of a foreign language and opens new suggestions for further researches.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- [1] OXFORD, R. 1990. Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know. New York: Newbury House Publishers. ISBN 0-8384-2862-2
- [2] GARDNER, H. 1995. Reflections on Multiple Intelligences: Myths and Messages. Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 77, 3
- [3] SIROTOVÁ, M. 2010. Vyučovacie metódy v práci vysokoškolského učiteľa. Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, ISBN 978-80-8105-201-9
- [4] SMETANOVÁ, E. 2009. Student-centred approach and foreign language acquisition. In: Linguistics and Didactics in the 21st Century – Trends, Analyses and Prognoses II. Praha: Kernberg Publishing, s.r.o. ISBN 978-80-87168-09-7