

Acta Beregsasiensis

A II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskola
tudományos évkönyve

Науковий вісник
Закарпатського угорського інституту ім. Ф. Ракоці II

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SZERKESZTŐBIZOTTSÁG: Soós Kálmán, Orosz Ildikó, Csernicskó István, Barkáts Jenő
A KÖTETET SZERKESZTETTE: Penckófer János, Kohut Attila

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DR. ILONA HUSZTI*

How can a language learner be successful in second or third language acquisition?

Rezümé A jelen tanulmányban vázolt kutatás arra kereste a választ, segít-e valakinek a második vagy harmadik nyelv tanulásában az, ha már sikeresen elsajátított egy idegen nyelvet. Esetként egy olyan fiatal tanárt választottam, aki az anyanyelvén kívül három másik nyelvet is tanult. A kapott kutatási eredmények teljes mértékben alátámasztják a téma szakirodalmából ismert bizonyított tényeket, miszerint ha valaki ért már el sikereket egy idegen nyelvnek a tanulásában, annak a második vagy harmadik nyelv elsajátítása már nem okozhat különösebb gondot.

Резюме У статті розглядається питання, чи допоможе студентові знання іноземної мови при вивченні другої або третьої іноземної мови. Дослідження було проведено з молодим викладачем-лінгвістом, який володів трьома (іноземними) мовами. Результати доказали, що попередні успіхи з вивчення іноземної мови позитивно впливають на вивчення та засвоєння другої або третьої іноземної мови, упрощуючи навчальний процес.

Introduction

It is a generally held belief that the more languages people speak, the better they can manage to achieve great goals in life. In second language acquisition research there have been many studies conducted on various aspects of individual differences, like learner beliefs about learning a second or foreign language (Horwitz, 1987), learning styles and learner strategies (Pearson, 1988; Ehrmann & Oxford, 1990), successful learning (Rubin, 1975; Reiss, 1985; Wenden, 1987; Stern, 1975; Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern & Todesco, 1996), unsuccessful learning (Vann & Abraham, 1990). In her article, Rubin (1975) gives seven characteristic features of the good language learner. She states that the good language learner is someone who is a willing and accurate guesser, has a strong drive to communicate, is often not inhibited, is prepared to attend to form, practises, monitors his own speech and the speech of others, and attends to meaning. Reiss (1985) adds one more characteristic to Rubin's list, saying that

the good language learner is a *silent speaker*. He answers questions mentally whether called upon or not (p. 518).

Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco (1996) attempted to identify the characteristics of the successful and unsuccessful language learners, the strategies and techniques used by them. They found that

the good language learner is someone who actively involves himself in the language learning process, either right from the beginning or later; he also finds ways to overcome obstacles, whether linguistic, affective or environmental; he monitors his own performance; he studies, practises and involves himself in communication (p. 39).

The issues about the good language learner by Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman *et al.* (1996) aroused the interest of the investigator of this research. The investigation presented in this paper is a case study in which the researcher wished

* Department of English Language and Literature II. Rákóczi Ferenc Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education (Ilona Huszti, PhD, teaches English language teaching methodology to English major college students. Her research interests are teaching and learning foreign languages, and teaching and researching English language reading skills).

to examine one learner's attitude towards learning a second or third language in a multilingual environment, the strategies used by him and his reflection on his own language learning experience.

Aim of the study

The research question of the present study is defined as follows: What are the strategies used by a language learner in a special language environment where at least three languages (Hungarian, Ukrainian and Russian) are simultaneously in use. The expectation was that previous knowledge of a foreign language (in this case — Russian) helped the subject in learning a third language (i.e. Ukrainian). The author aimed at identifying the strategies and techniques used by the learner during the process of learning the second and third language, investigating the subject's feelings about his own language learning experience, and exploring factors (e.g. previous knowledge of foreign language) influencing the person's achievements in learning a third language.

Method

Subject

The subject of the present case study has been carefully selected. It was a 27-year-old male lecturer at a higher educational establishment in Transcarpathia, whose mother tongue is Hungarian and who speaks four languages altogether, but each at a different level. Life experience showed that he was a good language learner and as such, he was believed to be the proper subject for an investigation of this kind. He was welcoming to the inquiry and also easy to contact. In order to preserve his anonymity, from here on the subject is referred to as Mr. S.

Description of the Instrument Used

A reduced version of the interview questionnaire devised by Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern & Todesco (1996) for their study of the good language learner was applied. The reason for choosing this instrument as a basic tool for the present case study was that the aims of the research by Naiman *et al.* (1996) and this study were quite similar to each other. It seemed that the use of this very tool might prove useful in investigating the case because it contains questions focusing on learner strategies and feelings about language learning experience which are the subject matters of the present study. The original interview questionnaire (Naiman *et al.*, 1996) consisted of two parts, the first was semi-structured while the second was structured. It lasted for about two hours, thus it was a very long one. A new 'interview schedule' (Seliger & Shohamy, 1990; Wallace, 1998) or 'interview guide' (Johnson, 1992) was designed based on the interview questionnaire used by Naiman *et al.* (1996), but in which the number of questions was reduced. Only those questions were included in the new interview schedule which were considered to be useful in reaching the main goals. There were groups of questions asking for pieces of information such as what the person's attitude

towards learning a new language is, how he would like to begin, continue and end the process of foreign language learning, what his final aims would be, his feelings about his language learning experience, whether he thought that knowing another language helped or hindered him in learning a new language etc. Questions III, III.2, IV and VI of Part Two of the original interview questionnaire (Naiman *et al.*, 1996) were omitted from the new instrument because they were thought to play a less important role in finding out the needed information.

The new interview guide created in this way was translated into Hungarian and then validated by asking first and second year students in a Language Pedagogy Ph.D. program in Hungary to reflect on it. Their valuable opinions and comments were taken into consideration and were used for improving the interview protocol.

Procedure

The interview was conducted in spring, 2000. The investigator interviewed Mr. S. in an informal way in a room known by him, where he felt comfortable. The interview was tape-recorded with the permission of Mr. S., obtaining a 22-minute long recording, which later was transcribed. The language of the interview was Hungarian, the first language of both the interviewee and interviewer, for the sake of better understanding and avoidance of misinterpretation of meanings.

Results

Mr. S. has a very good background concerning language learning. He began studying Russian at the age of three when he began attending the kindergarten, German — at the age of ten (already at school), Ukrainian — at the age of seventeen (when he started his studies at university). (He also encountered English when he was eighteen years old but he did not begin to study it at that time.) The rationale for taking up these languages is quite various: the reason for learning Russian is that until 1991, i.e. the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian was compulsory in all the schools of the member states of the union. Now instead of Russian the Ukrainian language is taught, because this is the state language in Ukraine. At the age of ten at latest, every schoolchild in the former Soviet Union had to learn a foreign language (a western European one) and schools could choose from four: English, German, French, and Spanish. Thus, when Mr. S. was ten, it was obligatory for him to take up a foreign language — German, which was the chosen foreign language to be taught at his school. Article 10 of the Constitution of Ukraine declares that Ukrainian is the official language in Ukraine (see the Constitution of Ukraine) and as such it has been introduced to the curriculum in all educational establishments in Ukraine. Therefore, learning this language was a must for Mr. S. when he began his studies at university.

As the researcher was interested in how previous knowledge of languages affected the later attempts of Mr. S. towards learning new ones, the results presented here will mainly concentrate on answers to the questions throwing light on this aspect. The main point of interest here is whether the knowledge of Russian influenced the acquiring of Ukrainian. The investigator's sub-hypothesis was that knowing Russian helped Mr. S. in learning Ukrainian, because these two

languages belong to the Slavic branch of the Indo-European family of languages, so they are very close to one another. To the question if Russian and Ukrainian are similar, Mr. S. responded that he thought them to be similar, mainly the grammar and vocabulary of them. He admitted that knowing Russian helped him greatly in understanding lectures at the university. He said¹:

I had Ukrainian classes twice a week. At these classes I could manage well with my knowledge of Russian. I understood the lectures given in Ukrainian, but when asked, I answered in Russian.

Question VII (see Appendix) asked if Mr. S. thought that knowing another foreign language helped or hindered him in learning a new one. In his answer he admits that

it helped me much in comprehension, e.g. when I had to understand the Ukrainian lectures at university, and even today, when I don't remember a Ukrainian word but I do remember it in Russian, it helps me to find the proper Ukrainian equivalent and express myself in a clearer way, even if the Russian and Ukrainian words are not quite similar in form.

The use of a bilingual dictionary is frequent in the language learning process of Mr. S., but through the answer to the question *What kind of dictionary do you prefer to use: monolingual or bilingual?* (see Appendix, Question V) it became clear that he also finds the use of a monolingual dictionary important, because when he has to compose a text (e.g. formal or informal letters) either in Russian or Ukrainian, he can get all the needed pieces of information about the usage of a word from a monolingual dictionary rather than a bilingual one.

I prefer using a monolingual dictionary because in this way it is easier for me to get the information I need. In a bilingual dictionary I can find only the equivalents of a word in another language, but for example, when I have to compose something in Russian I always use a monolingual (explanatory) dictionary.

Because he began learning Russian at a very early age (he was three), a so-called 'language learning skill' has been worked out in him. He can generalise and deduce meaning from given facts due to this ability.

I think I have a kind of language learning skill because I began to learn a second language at a very early age, so I 'have learnt' how to study a language.

When asked about the idea of learning a new foreign language (see Appendix, Question I), Mr. S. answered that he was very excited at this thought and he would take it as a real task to accomplish. The language he would like to study is English. He needs this language for scientific purposes — to participate in international conferences in the field of science he is interested in. First of all, he would like to join a language class (see Appendix, Question II) and

... what I would do now with pleasure is to learn to understand, at least at the level I understand Ukrainian so that when I am at a conference, I could participate in debates at least 'passively', I mean, to be able to understand what the whole thing is about.

His final goal would be to reach proficiency in the four basic language skills, i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing.

¹ The excerpts from the tapescript in this paper are presented in the author's translation.

Mr. S. was questioned about his feelings about his language learning experience (see Appendix, Question IX). He feels frustration from time to time when he has to speak Ukrainian. No feelings of this kind occur to him when speaking Russian. He explains this by having greater experience and routine in Russian than in Ukrainian. In his view, this frustration is due to the fact that

when I have to speak Ukrainian and I hear myself speak, I feel my pronunciation is bad and I use a restricted number of words ... I fear that my reputation will worsen.

He never feels he is ridiculous when speaking Ukrainian, because he knows what he says is preceded by a relatively long and careful constructing process

I mean I never utter anything in a foreign language until I'm sure it is correct grammatically and in word usage.

In this way he meets all the demands he has set to himself.

Mr. S. admitted he sometimes feels inhibited when he has to speak, but he does nothing to overcome his inhibitions. There is a controversy in the answer to the question about Mr. S.'s inhibitions, because during the interview he added that this feeling began to vanish as he uses Ukrainian more often now. Thus the solution of the problem is in regular practice of the language.

Question VIII of the interview questionnaire (see Appendix) asked about the learning strategies and techniques Mr. S. has developed in learning the sound system of a language, in learning its grammar, vocabulary, in developing listening comprehension etc. The answer to this question reveals that he has worked out a number of study habits: in learning vocabulary — repetition or finding similar words in a language studied before; in listening comprehension — listening to TV programs:

I quite often listen to Ukrainian news programs on TV;

in learning to read:

I usually read professional material and academic literature in English;

in learning to talk — practising the language through talking to people:

I talk to my Ukrainian colleagues in Ukrainian, though they understand Hungarian.

It is evident that Mr. S. tries to take advantage of all the opportunities he has to practise the language.

Answers to Questions IV and VI did not turn out to be valuable for the research because they contribute little to better understanding the subject's foreign language learning process. This might be due to improper question selection and as such, it is a drawback of the present research.

Conclusions

Although the interview conducted during this study provides only a small amount of data reported subjectively, they seem to confirm certain findings of

researchers about the good language learner. The language learning strategies developed by Mr. S. during his long language learning experience (repetition, finding similar words in previously acquired languages, reading academic literature, listening to news programs on TV, talking to native speakers) all assisted him in better acquiring the languages he learned so far. He had learned to learn languages because he started his first foreign language at an early age. He made cross-lingual comparisons. This technique proved to be especially useful as Ukrainian is similar to Russian concerning their grammar and vocabulary.

He never feels he is ridiculous because he knows what he says in Russian or Ukrainian is well-structured and grammatically correct. This seems to confirm one of the characteristics of the good language learner defined by Stern (1975) that the good language learner monitors his speech and attends to form and meaning.

Sometimes he is frustrated and feels inhibited. The reason for this he sees in his fear of making mistakes and of the worsening of his reputation. He knows that the best solution of this problem is regular practice (c.f. Reiss, 1985; Horwitz, 1987), but he does almost nothing to overcome his inhibitions. He believes that his frustration and inhibition will vanish with time and routine. Therefore, he takes advantage of all the opportunities to practise the language. This is another feature of the good language learner (c.f. Reiss, 1985).

The results of the present investigation suggest that at the beginner level a bilingual dictionary is more useful, while at a later stage it is more beneficial to use a monolingual one. This relates to the findings of the good language learner study by Naiman *et al.* (1996) who came to the conclusion that “a bilingual dictionary was necessary initially, but that a monolingual dictionary should be used later” (p. 26).

The main question of this investigation was to find out if there was any relationship between previous knowledge of a foreign language and learning a new one. It has been found that the knowledge of a foreign language greatly assists in learning a new one, especially if these two languages are very similar to each other. Thus, knowing Russian had an impact on the process of learning Ukrainian in Mr. S.’s case and this influence can be regarded as positive because it promoted better understanding the third language.

Mr. S. had a positive attitude towards the idea of learning a new foreign language; he was very excited at the idea of it. The rationale for choosing English for this imaginary learning situation was professional: he needed English for academic purposes, i.e. to participate in international conferences on sociolinguistics. This explanation reveals an “instrumental orientation” (Naiman *et al.*, 1996, p. 20). Mr. S. would like to join a language class, so at the initial stage he prefers formal instruction. His final goal would be to reach a high level of competence in the four basic language skills: speaking, writing, listening and reading. This proves the fact that he strives for proficiency.

In sum, the results of the present investigation have shown that Mr. S. possessed many of the features of the good language learner. His previous experience with Russian helped him in learning to comprehend Ukrainian as these two languages are similar in vocabulary and grammar. This previous experience was also useful for developing learning strategies later applied by the subject. Although the findings of this case study cannot be generalised, it can still well serve as a rationale or starting point for further research.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (English version)

I would like to talk to you about your own personal language learning experience.

Your name will be kept confidential, and there is *no* testing involved.

If you don't mind, however, I'd like to tape our conversation as an aid to memory for myself.

May I now ask you a few general questions for the research records?

RESPONDENT

NAME:

AGE:

ADDRESS:

PHONE:

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND:

High School

University/College

PRESENT OCCUPATION:

PREVIOUS OCCUPATION:

I'd like to ask you some facts about your language learning experience from your childhood to the present time.

1. What languages were spoken in your home?
 - α) What do you regard as your native language?
2. Which was the first foreign language you learned?
3. When did you start and how long did you learn?
4. Where and under what circumstances did you learn?
5. Did the teacher speak in the foreign language most of the time?
6. Did you have to speak a lot yourself or did you mainly read and/or translate?
7. Do you remember what kind of homework you had to do?
8. Considering your level in (your success/failure in learning), would you say

this was due to the *teacher/s* (thanks to the teacher/the teacher's fault) or did it have something to do with the *school* or the *environment* or would you say that you developed some *special study habits* or that you may have some *particular personal characteristics* that helped/hindered you in learning?

Now I would like to ask you a few more specific questions concerning language learning. Some of the questions may not apply to you. Don't feel obliged to answer.

I. Imagine that you had the opportunity and time to learn another language now. What would you say at the thought of learning a new language?

1. I hate the thought of it.
2. It scares me.
3. I don't mind doing it.
4. I would look forward to doing it.
5. I'm very excited at the idea of it.

Would your final goal be to...

speak and understand the spoken language?

read and write the language?

speak, understand and read?

speak, understand, read and write?

OTHER?

II. Let's now consider how you would actually go about learning.

What would you like to do first of all?

1. Travel to the country and immerse yourself in the language?
2. Travel to the country and take a language course there?
2. Buy a course book and study by yourself?
3. Go to a teacher or a language school for private lessons?
4. Join a language class?
5. A combination of these? Specify:
6. Other:

III. Beginning now with the *early* stages of language learning, what would you mainly like to do at that level? I'll give you some examples. Please tell me which of these you regard as most important. But feel free to disregard them or add your own ideas.

3. I'd mainly like to learn to understand the spoken language.
2. I'd mainly like to learn to read.
4. I'd mainly like to learn the pronunciation.
5. I'd mainly like to learn to use simple conversational phrases.
6. I'd mainly like to learn how to write the language.
7. I'd mainly like to get an overview of the grammar.
8. I'd mainly like to learn about the cultural background.
9. I would like a combination of these. Could you please specify?
10. Other?

IV. You have mentioned what you would like to learn at the early stages of language learning. Can you think of anything you would particularly like to learn or emphasise at an intermediate or advanced level?

*INTERMEDIATE:**ADVANCED:*

V. Some people find that in learning a new language one must completely forget one's native language. Others say one cannot and should not. To what extent do you find that comparing your native language with the foreign language helps you in learning a new language?

—To what extent do you find translations useful?

—Would you prefer to use a bilingual dictionary or rather a dictionary that offers explanations in the foreign language?

VI. Do you feel that one can actually learn to think in the foreign language?

YES:

NO:

—If yes: how do you think one might achieve that?

—How important do you think it is? *VERY* *NOT SO MUCH*

VII. So far, we have talked about what you'd like to learn, how you would go about doing it and how your native language might influence your learning other languages.

Considering all this, would you say that you have developed any language study habits (tricks or techniques) that you would find useful in learning the new language?

1. in learning the sound system
2. in learning the grammar
3. in learning vocabulary/words
4. in developing listening comprehension
5. in learning to talk
6. in learning to read
7. in learning how to express yourself in written form.

VII. My final question now concerns your *feelings* about your language learning experience.

1. Many language learners feel very negative about their learning experiences. They say they feel

- discouraged
- frustrated
- impatient
- confused by the difficulties of the language learning task

Have you experienced any of these feelings?

Could you tell me more about your feeling of ...?

2. Other language learners say that the new language feels e) absurd to them, and that they feel f) ridiculous expressing themselves in the foreign language.

Did you ever feel that way?

3. Some people feel very g) inhibited and h) helpless when they actually *use* the language.

Is this experience familiar to you? Could you elaborate?

In general, as (if) you shared (some of) these feelings, what did you do to overcome them?