

JĘZYKOZNAWSTWO

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LEARNING AS A LIFE STRATEGY

1. Introduction

In this paper I intend to report on my findings obtained in the research work conducted for the purpose of my PhD dissertation. On the basis of what I observed during the experimental sessions, learning as a strategy of life can be confronted with on different layers of the psycholinguistic analysis, of which one will be explored in the current paper. The assumption in this paper is that the educational process becomes a life strategy as it orchestrates a vast collection of psycholinguistic variables; those variables, in turn, can only be examined from the extended – life-long – perspective. The strategic character of one's education is realized in an assumption that one's education is, to a large extent, dominated by autodidactic and self-therapeutic procedures, which are aimed at conscious and self-steered life adaptation.

2. The communicative approach in the foreign language education

To date, methodologists interested in foreign language teaching and learning traditionally devoted their energy to specifying the nature of a collection of already agreed-on aspects of the language learning process. Motivation types, personality, attitude, inhibitions, extraversion vs. introversion, turn-taking or risk-taking to mention but these, were analysed in methodological literature, and either the presence or absence of these traits was ascribed to students observed (Brown 1987; Zybert 2002). All teaching methods and techniques, which crystallised into the communicative approach in the 80's and 90's glottodidactic research and practice, were based on dichotomous oppositions of this basic type presence – absence of a given feature.

In this scientific strive to construct a universally applicable classification of language learner's features and predispositions, glottodidactics neglected the psycholinguistic dynamics and consequent on it psycholinguistic uniqueness of every educational situation. In a word, in the communicative approach in the foreign language education research the scientific effort was to design a universal model of the educational process and a universal educational method.

3. The post-communicative approach in the foreign language education

In the meantime, as Pfeiffer rightly observes (2001), no universal model or method are possible, with such a vast repertoire of situation-specific and organism-specific contextual data which are to be regarded every time a university teacher enters the pre-didactic or didactic phases of the educational process. Moreover, as psychological, cognitive, linguistic or sociological variables, characterizing both the educational situation and students embedded in it, are in a constant state of flux, one can describe both a given group of students and the educational situation only in terms of dynamically transforming processes, rather than finite, constant values. It seems that only the lifelong perspective will enable an eclectic and multidimensional analysis of the dynamics of the educational mechanisms and context. Below I will present briefly the conclusions I came to in one of the experiments I conducted on twenty first-year students of English Philology at University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. This illustration will shed some light at the lifelong aspects of one's (language) education, as proposed in the present paper. The full account can be found elsewhere (Bogusławska-Tafelska, forthcoming). At this point, however, it has to be noted that these considerations are preliminary and need further scientific verification.

3.1 The psycholinguistic diagnosis of learning difficulties

The experiment was implemented into the regular writing course classes. In the course plan I included a writing assignment called 'portfolio'. Portfolios are the collections of eight paragraphs (up to 180 words each) students are to write outside the classroom and submit for the evaluation. The time limit in the experiment was two months. The objective was to develop and check students' linguistic and strategic competence, creativity capabilities and their ability to control the craft of formal paragraph writing. The task was preceded by several weeks of theoretical, classroom instruction. Below it will be revealed that the task brought to light other, this time hidden, psycholinguistic mechanisms that go on in the students' cognitive systems.

The students received eight topics, accompanied by the task specification and my oral advice, which was repeated several times throughout the course, and which referred to their initial procedure that should consist in narrowing down each topic and formulating the thesis. They were also told that it was not their views or interpretations that would be evaluated. The teacher was waiting for the samples of their skills and linguistic competence as English paragraph writers. The subjects received the following topic list:

1. Intuition.
2. The pressure on science to 'make sense', to be consistent with common knowledge is enormous.
3. Censorship in the media vs. the principle of the freedom of speech.
4. E-mail messages may not always be secret.
5. The effects of constant cravings.
6. What is 'musical perception'?
7. The criteria of beauty.
8. Mastery is a generalized concept indicating that events may be controlled and therefore may sometimes stop being unexpected.

Below I will outline briefly the results obtained in this research. Having received the topic list, three out of twenty students came to the teacher/researcher asking for help; they did not know how to interpret four of the topics. So, a number of ideas were suggested to them. In the meantime, 85% of the subjects made an impression of being in control of the paragraph writing process. However, finally it turned out that the group displayed the symptoms of panic and stress, later on transformed into negative emotional states indicating frustration and/or anger. A group of the subjects went to their year supervisor to complain of 'too high expectations the teacher formulated in the course of writing'; they were said to use the description 'too sublime paragraph topics'.

As for the paragraphs themselves which were submitted by the subjects on time, the majority duplicated the interpretations suggested by the teacher to those three students who decided to ask for help. In the portfolios hardly any novel, individually built up interpretation of any of the topics could be found.

The psycholinguistic analysis of the causes of this defective cognitive-emotional-motivational processing of the students has to be undertaken here. The hypothesis is that the subjects display the symptoms of the cognitive asymmetry between the extralinguistic and linguistic (textual) data processing; put in simpler terms, the cognitive systems of the students do not manage to provide new, innovative and, at the same time, acceptable solutions to unconventional, novel tasks. The systems do not rise to the situation, the processing is defective, as a result the following mental scenario is realized:

1. The subjects receive the description of the task and, in a sense automatically, they presuppose proper, in their opinion, and safe solutions. Depending on what stimulates them – the top-down perspective or the bottom-up material – they stay within this code suggested to them while approaching the task. If the students are confronted with the linguistic material (the paragraph topics) but the task requires the change of the code and a creative effort to mediate between the bottom-up material (topics) and the top-down perspective (novel interpretations, visions, abstract considerations related to the topic) the mental processes get stuck; the cognitive system makes conscious the information about the failure.

2. The subjects realize the growing cognitive difficulties to do the task. The motivation is strong to have the work behind them (in other experiments it was revealed that the negative, instrumental motivation is dominant among the subjects). When the system experiences obstruction in cognitive processing, emotional arousal comes into play, to accelerate and support energetically the problem-solving programs of the organism.

3. The students are not skilled emotion-readers, so they find it problematic to grasp and understand their own emotions.

4. Having realized the emotional alert, the cognitive systems of the students activate the mental scene of the teacher being an enemy and a primary stressor in the educational process; this is the first and most vivid explanation the cognitive-interpretive systems provide the subjects with. In short, the students associate their nervousness with the teacher and her expectations.

5. Growing frustration, goal-oriented since the moment of the stressor identification, turns into anger and objection. The students understand now the source of their problems – the academic teacher and her expectations – as a result, they group together and collectively decide to voice their objection (pay a visit to the year supervisor).

6. The students receive some clues from their peers and/or from the teacher/researcher and manage to produce the interpretations of the topics. The cognitive systems, with the help of emotional and motivational mechanisms, manage to provide some solution to the cognitive and emotional problems.

This is a suggested psycholinguistic scenario of the educational process under discussion. It is vital to notice that the sequence of processes, both conscious and going on below the consciousness threshold, illustrates a certain strategic shortcut the systems undertook, being not equipped to carry on smoothly mental/emotional/motivational programs. Defective instrumental motivation and the external stressor identification seem to compose a heuristic the subjects resorted to when in trouble to do the task.

4. The process of learning redefined

The outline description of the educational process ongoing as prompted by the writing assignment indicates a twofold educational help which needs to be regarded here. First, undoubtedly, the academic teacher representing the host educational environment is in charge of the process and the students' success (Holliday 1994:17). This is a traditional methodological premise, deeply rooted in the classic 'grammar-translation orientation', which points to the decisive authoritative role of the teacher in control of the teacher-student dyad. Secondly, however, what has to be analyzed here as well is the self-responsibility and self-work on the part of each student involved into the educational process. When considering the experiment results and psycholinguistic phenomena reported above, one cannot reduce the diagnosis and ultimate didactic remedies exclusively to the analysis and remodeling of the student – teacher dyad; in addition, it seems to be a considerable simplicity to concentrate only on the curriculum requirements, not to mention automatic adjusting the university curriculum to the present 'state of affairs' as observed in the experiment. Neither a plain systemic change within the educational process organization, nor the traditional psychological and intellectual description of the students' personalities will result in a functionally helpful didactic diagnosis. These measures were tested numerous times by Polish teachers, often acting as teachers/researchers. The resulting success was of a 'publishing' nature, bringing about a vast collection of theoretical inquires and analyses. In the meantime, students with educational problems of the type outlined above need educational help. In order to redirect and navigate the educational process of students at this particular stage of their education as presented above, a twofold approach has to be undertaken, in which both parties are activated, namely, the academic teacher representing the educational system, and the students themselves, with their cognitive-motivational-emotional profiles. The diagram below synthesizes the internal – intrapersonal – and the external – systemic and environmental – conditions that define the process of learning. Put briefly, the assumption behind the proposed definition of the educational process is that a language learner's personality undergoes continual modifications which are triggered both by the stimulation from the outside and from the inside, the educational situation itself being a modifying factor as well. This presupposition leaves much room for psycholinguistic training to develop the psycholinguistic parameters in students wanted or preferred in the language education, and more generally, in the process of life adaptation. When one considers the above interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of the learning process, the very process seems to be the key to generally understood life success and happiness.

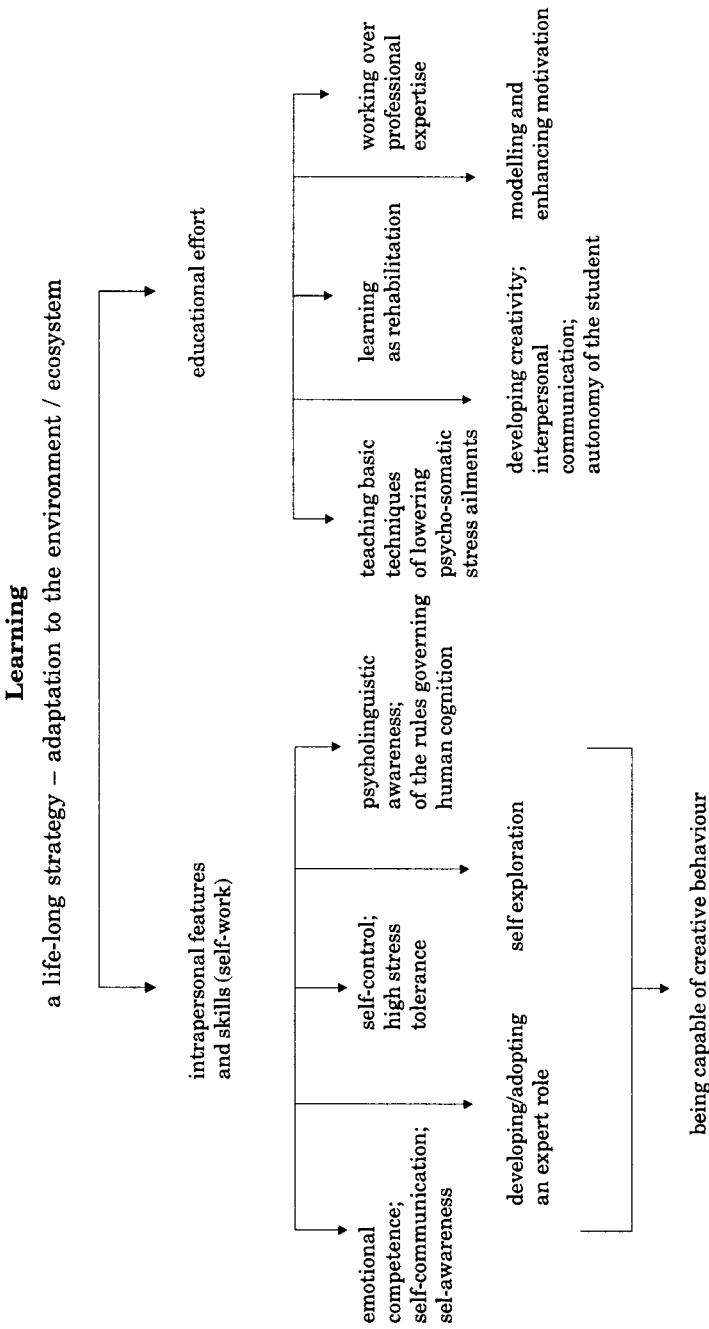


Diagram. The process of learning as a life-long strategy

5. Conclusions

To summarize, the learning process is a life strategy as it can be characterized by a number of dynamically transforming parameters which, in turn, can only be discussed from the extended, lifelong perspective; among the parameters that may help to profile the subjects from my experiment are the following:

- cognitive/linguistic competence; at this phase of the subjects' educational process, these parameters depicted certain defective values;
- emotional management; what was noticed in the educational process currently described was emotional illiteracy in certain aspects bringing about the alexithimic symptoms;
- instrumental, negative motivation;
- group psychology forces; at this point of the subjects' educational process, the group psychology radiation had definitely a disorganizing and emotionally unstable character;
- cognitive noise that the subjects experience during the learning process.

All of these parameters are deeply rooted in the personal biographies of the subjects; and more importantly, all these parameters change in the course of the educational process, being the components of a dynamically changing language ego. It seems more than probable that the subjects are not confined to their cognitive/motivational/emotional defects, and that the help to soothe them can come both from the inside – the organism's potential for self-regulation – and from the outside – the proper educational offer and classroom instruction. To conclude, the scientific inquiry into the process of learning needs to combine:

- the knowledge of the ontogenic and developmental causes of students' learning personalities and styles
- with the awareness of the dynamic transformations within the students' current psycholinguistic profiles and within the here and now ecosystem the students are embedded in.

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Summary

The goal of the paper is to explore the life-long specificity of the educational process, with special attention devoted to a vast collection of the psycholinguistic and ecolinguistic variables which orchestrate one's education. The dynamics and complexity of the foreign language education, in the context of the Polish university, ask for the twofold psycholinguistic treatment, that is, for the intraorganism strategic competence and behaviour; and for the interpersonal intervention, in the form of the educational offer and individually designed classroom work. The study proposes a redefinition of the learning process, which may constitute the starting point of a revised methodological framework in the context of the university foreign language education.