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**Language Learning Strategies of Dominant
Bilinguals**

**PhD Thesis
Summary**

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Key words: *bilingualism, multilingualism, mother tongue, competence, language learning strategies, learning a second language, learning further languages, attitude towards language learning, models of teaching strategies, learning strategies.*

Introduction

Contemporary research demonstrates that both the learner's native and non-native languages may play a role when acquiring a new language. It is becoming increasingly clear that the state of being bilingual influences third or fourth, and additional language learning processes. Being bilingual may mean a lot of advantages in linguistic, cognitive or social development. Learning a third language in Romania, especially in Transylvania has been favored by various historical, social, cultural and educational factors strongly connected to the state of bilingualism. As an English teacher at the Department of Sfintu Gheorghe of the Babes-Bolyai University I have noticed those particular phenomena which accompany my students' language learning. The students of the Department are mainly from counties with notable Hungarian (Sekler) presence (Covasna, Harghita, Mures). I meet them once a week during their three-year studies which allows me to follow the development of their English proficiency across the years. It has become obvious that some of the students could use their Romanian language knowledge during learning the English language while others were lacking the ability to compare the two languages and take advantage of their previous language knowledge. Therefore I decided to investigate the bilingualism of these language learners from the point of view of language pedagogy and multilingualism.

Aims of the research

The aim of my thesis was to research the effect of dominant bilingualism of minority language learners on third language acquisition. Can the second language knowledge (Romanian) help the acquisition of the third language (English) or the effect can be ignored? The thesis analyses the role of those factors which are present during learning a third language. First of all it takes into consideration psycholinguistic and language pedagogical aspects as it explores the language learning strategies of the language learners and describes those factors which refer to the process of individual language learning. The research of language learning strategies of dominant bilinguals as

minority language learners is quite scanty. However, bilingualism and multilingualism research demonstrates that bilingual and multilingual learners use different language learning strategies compared to monolingual language learners.

The aim of my research was to explore the language learning strategy use of Hungarian dominant bilingual language learners. Most studies indicate a positive effect of balanced bilingualism in additional language acquisition. However there were no references regarding dominant bilingualism having the same positive effect on third language acquisition. Dominant bilingualism of the Hungarian minority language learners provides special circumstances under which language learning strategies are related both to second and third language acquisition. The deficient acquisition of the second language and the lack of developing appropriate competencies in second language have their consequences during learning additional languages.

My goal was to explore the relationship between the factors of dominant bilingualism: frequency and variety of language learning strategies, e.g. attitude towards second language, second language proficiency, formal/informal way of acquiring second language etc.

For the last three decades increasing number of researches has been focusing on language learning strategies, primarily in formal/educational environment. Summarizing the result of current research the choice of the six language learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation, affective, social) is affected by numerous factors, becoming even more complex in case of bilinguals. Language learning and the choice of learning strategies are determined by the age, gender, learning style, cultural background, attitude, motivation and previous learning experiences.

Presenting the hypotheses

The hypotheses of the thesis are based on the empirical experience that higher language proficiency correlates with more frequent and more varied strategy use. Therefore the first hypothesis refers to the extent the second language proficiency affects strategy choice. The second hypothesis deals with the relationship between third language proficiency and strategy choice. The third hypothesis is based on the formal/informal ways of acquiring second language; informal, spontaneous environment versus formal, academic environment exerts influence on language proficiency and choice of learner

strategies. The thesis explores the relationship between age, gender and language learning strategy use, assuming that higher Romanian or English language proficiency correlates with the frequency and variety of strategy use. Higher Romanian strategy would also correlate with frequent and varied strategy use in case of compensation strategies based on Romanian or English language competencies. The results of the research were compared with the ones of a control group in Hungary, to find out whether there is a significant difference related to strategy use between bilingual and monolingual language learners as assumed by the fourth hypothesis.

Research methodology

Quantitative method was used to analyze the data, in form of a questionnaire. The SILL-test¹ was added to the questionnaire, the collected data were analyzed together.

Besides the questionnaires there was a retrospective interview carried out which later served as a starting point for seven semi-structured interviews. The role of the retrospective interview was to offer a different angle compared to the SILL-questionnaire. During the retrospective interview further questions arose and semi-structured interviews were used to find answers to these questions. The interviews completed the results of the questionnaires with valuable conclusions. While the results of the questionnaires revealed the language learning strategy choice of the learners the interviews gave a deeper insight into the individual characteristics of learners' habits. The openness and awareness, motivation and positive experiences significantly help language learners to acquire Romanian, English or any additional languages. The scantiness in strategy choice can be traced back to poor language teaching methods in schools and lack of spontaneous language learning opportunities.

Finally, the thesis deals with the pragmatic, methodological aspect of the main topic. Strategy use can be developed by the conscious choice and alternation of the factors influencing language learning, which in turn affects learning success. Therefore it was important to explore the practical solutions of developing strategy use.

The structure of the thesis

¹ The *SILL* is a standardized measure with versions for students of a variety of languages. It has also been used in studies that correlate strategy use with variables such as learning styles, gender, proficiency level, and culture.

The thesis contains seven chapters. The first chapter, following the Introduction, deals with the interpretation of bilingualism and multilingualism related to the research. The main characteristics of mother tongue, second language and bilingualism, as well as multilingualism are presented in this chapter emphasizing the role of identity, competence and the role of strategies. The chapter presents the advantages and disadvantages of language learning by bilingual language learners, summarizes the results of related researches, the phenomena of transfer and interference, defining the role of age, the influence of intelligence, and the role of attitude in second language acquisition.

The second chapter presents language learning strategies in a detailed way, their categorization, and finally it presents the factors influencing strategy choice.

The third chapter begins with the presentation of the research methodology of bilingualism and multilingualism. It is followed by the description of questionnaires, interviews, tests, think-aloud-interviews and retrospective interviews together with the interpretation of their effectiveness and usefulness. The chapter's final section includes a description of the history of research and methodological issues of language learning strategies.

The following chapter deals with the empirical research in which the methods, the tools, the participants are thoroughly described. The quantitative research methods convey an insight into statistical data analysis before defining the hypotheses. The presentation of the quantitative methods is followed by the qualitative ones. The interpretation of the retrospective and semi-structured interviews is explained in a detailed way, comparing the strategy choice of the language learners in formal and informal environment.

The fifth chapter presents the analysis based on the questionnaire, following step-by-step the stated hypothesis. The results are interpreted along three dimensions. The first dimension is built on the factors linked to strategy use, emphasizing previous language knowledge and English proficiency. The strategies learnt and used during second language acquisition are transferred to third language acquisition. The second dimension refers to the correlations based on the frequency and variety of language learning strategies encountered during the research. Further correlations were found while

studying the formal/informal way of learning second language. The third dimension is created by the given linguistic and cultural milieu, which is based on the language learning habits and language proficiency of dominant bilinguals. There were further investigations based on the next factor influencing strategy choice, namely gender. In case of some strategies there were slight differences between the two genders, but these findings were less significant than demonstrated in other language learning strategy researches.

The interviews with the seven interviewees are presented in the sixth chapter. The individual language learning stories of the participants served as contexts for inner relations. In the interviews the language learners reflected upon their learning strategies, how they used these strategies while learning Romanian, later English or other foreign languages. The qualitative data allowed the analysis within the frames of the whole stories, the steps, techniques and strategies were all interwoven with different aspects and moments of the learners' lives. By analyzing the interviews, the questions referring to the circumstances of learning Romanian and English, to attitudes towards language learning meant an important completion, and additional pieces of information to the quantitative data analysis.

The last chapter deals with teaching language learning strategies. The theoretical and the empirical research are followed by a pragmatic approach to complete the research. This chapter presents the most important teaching models of language learning strategies, approaching the strategies analyzed during the research from an educational point of view. Taking into account the result of the survey a strategy teaching model is designed for the dominant bilingual language learners. The chapter ends with the detailed explanation and presentation of an actual language class, based on the before-mentioned model.

The conclusions

The conclusions of the thesis are summarised at the end of the thesis, and further research opportunities in the field are mentioned. The analysis of the data proved that higher language proficiency – in case of second and third language acquisition as well – leads to more frequent and varied strategy use. Together with other advantages of

bilingualism the role of previous language learning experience is emphasized during third language acquisition, the strategies already acquired during second language learning can be transferred to third language acquisition. It is difficult to grasp the list of strategies learnt and used during second language acquisition and this process becomes even more complex during third or additional language acquisition. Romanian language proficiency, as an important factor, affects the use of particular language learning strategies on a medium level, however higher Romanian proficiency correlates with higher English proficiency as well. Naturally, compensation strategies based on Romanian language competencies correlate better with higher Romanian proficiency, the relationship between the factors is closer, and the effect of the factors are stronger. Interestingly, higher English language proficiency also correlates better with compensation strategies based on Romanian language competencies. Higher language proficiency, Romanian or English obviously results in more frequent and varied strategy use. Further correlations were discovered by the analysis of formal/informal language learning environment. The informal/spontaneous language learning environment has a stronger effect on strategy use. The social strategies were revealed as most frequently used strategies which confirm that bilingual language learners benefit from their interpersonal relationships during the process of language learning. The cultural and social background of the participants is characterized by less individualism, being based on traditional relationships, therefore exchanging information or asking for help gains greater importance. The metacognitive strategies highlight the role of awareness, evaluating, and planning of their own learning by the language learners. The third most frequent strategy group is the memory strategies group, which directly affects language learning. Compensation strategies were the fourth most frequently used strategies by the dominant bilingual language learners. The cognitive and affective strategies were less “popular”, they affect successful language learning to a lesser degree. The cognitive strategies ranked higher due to globalization, and the ease of access to information. Watching English movies, channels proved to be a frequent strategy used by the participants. The low average use of the affective strategies shows the inability of language learners to deal with anxiety and emotions during the process of language learning. Gender also played role in language acquisition; there were slight differences in the use of strategies. This was obvious within the group of

compensation strategies based on Romanian competencies; women use these strategies more often than men, while in case of other strategies men were predominantly using them. Romanian language proficiency showed no significant differences based on gender; therefore it could not explain the differences between strategy uses in case of compensation strategies. The explanation probably lies in the conflict-avoiding attitude of women; they might use alternative ways to solve a problem, while men are more rational, goal-oriented. As well as the social expectations regarding male/female behavior and gender roles may have an effect on the habits of language learning, especially in a more traditional society. Age also slightly influences strategy use and it positively correlates with Romanian proficiency. This also signifies that formal, academic environment of learning the second language in case of minority language learners is insufficient for an appropriate, higher Romanian proficiency. Participants make efforts later, after graduating high school, due to expectations in the work environment, and informal relationships to learn the second language and these efforts may have positive outcomes during third language acquisition as well.

The analysis of the interviews is added to the results and conclusions of the quantitative data research; the results of those can be summarized in a few keywords. These keywords are related to the attitude towards language learning, approaching language acquisition from a personal/individual point of view which was not revealed by the data of the questionnaire research. *Trying to meet the social and language expectations, vague strategy choice, anxiety* are the most important factors accompanying language learning, compensated to a certain degree by *practice, awareness, openness, motivation* and *spontaneity*. It was obvious that according to the results of the interview analysis dominant bilinguals would need a different second language teaching method, mainly because they need more time to acquire appropriate Romanian language competencies, and because mostly positive experiences lead language learners towards successful communication in case of second or third language. The scantiness of strategy choice negatively affects the success of communication and language learning. It was also obvious that trying to meet the expectations, motivation leads a language learner to evaluate his or her own language learning development therefore favors metacognitive strategies, being more sensible towards them. Practice favors memory strategies; the

interviewees reported success in memorizing the new words. Motivation, positive experience fosters the use of social strategies by these language learners.

There is a need to teach language learning strategies for dominant bilingual language learners, by meeting various strategies when learning their second language, the list of these strategies will enlarge together with positive experiences and broadening knowledge. According to the interviews language learners rarely make conscious connection between the two languages; they mostly meet them in formal/academic environment, struggling through the obstacles of language acquisition. In the case of being more open towards one language, showing a positive attitude and being motivated in language learning the participants expressed the same openness towards the third language as well. This behavior sometimes shows feedback effects. Being more open towards the third language, by experiencing success in language learning may lead in turn towards a more open, positive attitude towards second language acquisition. The strategies of learning these two languages were transferable, although participants did not significantly enlarge their strategy repertoire in case of third language acquisition.

The bilingualism which favors third language acquisition could be the one stated by János Péntek, characterized by high proficiency in both languages and balanced bilingualism. In order to achieve this we need to seek ways, methods applied in education, in order to mobilize a large strategy repertoire. Individual factors are difficult to change, but it is easier to teach and practice more strategies in order to help language learning. It is supposed that a “good language learner” learns a language in a different way, knows something that is hidden from others, “has an ear for foreign languages”, hidden abilities which make language learning easier for him or her. This intangible ability can be grasped by teaching language learning strategies consistently in language classes. It seems possible to be taught to all those who might lack these abilities, the “ear for languages”, nicely expressed by Henry Adams: “They know enough who know how to learn”.

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