**Magda Pašalić***

*Faculty of Economics*
*University of Split, Croatia*
magda@efst.hr

# LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS IN EFL OF STUDENTS OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

## Abstract

It is a longstanding notion that many variables influence the ability to acquire foreign languages. Learning strategies belong to cognitive variables that can influence success in foreign language learning (FLL). This paper should further enlighten why some students are more successful in accomplishing language tasks, while others achieve poor results. The paper will include the results from research on the frequency of using learning strategies and their correlation with the success in General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990) questionnaire was used to detect students' strategies. Success in learning English was assessed by cloze tests designed for the purpose of the research. Research participants were first and second year students at the Faculty of Economics, University of Split, Croatia. Pedagogical implications for ESP tertiary level classes are also discussed in the paper.

## Key words

foreign language learning, language learning strategies, success in ESP, cloze test.

* Corresponding address: Magda Pašalić, Ekonomski fakultet u Splitu, Cvite Fiskovića 5, 21000 Split, Hrvatska.

## Sažetak

Odavno je poznato da na sposobnost usvajanja i učenja stranih jezika utiču mnogi faktori. Strategije učenja pripadaju skupu kognitivnih faktora od kojih može da zavisi uspešnost učenja stranog jezika. U radu predstavljamo rezultate istraživanja sprovedenog među studentima I i II godine Ekonomskog fakulteta u Splitu o vezi između učestalosti upotrebe šest vrsta strategija učenja i uspeha u učenju opšteg engleskog i engleskog jezika struke. Strategije učenja ispitivane su pomoću upitnika SILL (Oxford, 1990), a uspeh se merio *cloze* testom, izrađenim posebno za potrebe ovog istraživanja. U radu se razmatraju pedagoške implikacije rezultata istraživanja za nastavu engleskog jezika struke na visokoškolskom nivou.

## Ključne reči

učenje stranog jezika, strategije za učenje jezika, uspeh u učenju engleskog jezika struke, *cloze* test.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many factors are connected with success in foreign language learning. In the last 20 years, the trends in research in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have focused mostly on disclosing the ways students acquire a foreign or a second language and less on establishing an effective method of teaching foreign languages. In reality, acquiring any subject requires substantial cognitive or mental abilities. In this process affective factors are not to be neglected either. Other factors relevant to the process of learning a foreign language would include society and previous experience students gained while learning foreign languages.

Besides conveying the facts, implementing the learning-how-to-learn teaching approach has become one of the major goals of education at tertiary level (Wong & Nunan, 2011). This approach initiated the research on learning strategies, considered to be the tools that facilitate learning. The absence of learning strategies was recognised as a crucial obstacle to students who start their tertiary education (Marentič Požarnik & Mihevc, 1997 as cited in Jurkovič, 2013). In the process of learning foreign languages, students can boost their confidence by becoming aware of the wide range of language learning strategies and by being able to use them effectively. These can make them more independent from their language instructors and help them become autonomous and more efficient learners. Furthermore, language learners must become aware of the fact that their success in foreign language learning is to a great extent their own responsibility. The progress they wish to make in, for example, English as a foreign language very

much depends on their ability and motivation to take opportunities to learn that language (Oxford, 1990). Oxford (1990: 1) claims that

> Learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence.

According to Chamot (2004), learning strategies are considered to be conscious actions or techniques and thoughts that students use to accomplish certain language task.

The paper analyses the data gained from the research of students' language learning strategies and their correlation with the success in English. It focuses on one of the cognitive factors significant in learning English, i.e. learning strategies, and their potential impact on the progress students can make. However, the paper will, at the same time, include the impact that language learning strategy usage has on learning ESP. The success that students are able to achieve, particularly in Business English (BE), will also be taken into consideration in the interpretations of the research results since our research participants were the students of Economics and Business. What is relevant to the interpretation of the research results is the fact that cloze tests, used as instruments to measure success in English, included texts from the ESP context. The ESP context includes special teaching situations and often methodology that differs from the one used in general English classes (Gatehouse, 2001). "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (Hutchinson et al., 1987: 19).

## 2. THE RESEARCH

The goal of the research was to examine which language learning strategies Croatian students of Economics and Business most frequently use while learning English, and try to establish whether there is a connection between strategies and success in English as a foreign language, in English for Specific Purposes in particular.

### 2.1. The sample

The research included 201 students of the Faculty of Economics, University of Split, of which almost 70% were 1st year students and about 30% were 2nd year students. All of them attended obligatory courses in Business English: the 1st year students attended the first obligatory course in BE and the 2nd year students the

129

third obligatory course. The majority of students (more than 60% of them) had high marks in their previous English courses. The arithmetic mean of the whole sample equalled 3.88. Most of the research participants were learning English for 8-11 years.

## 2.2. Instruments used in the research: SILL and Cloze test

Data on learning strategies were gained by the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire (Oxford, 1990), which was translated and adapted for Croatian students by Mihaljević-Djigunović (2002). The questionnaire reveals the data on how frequently students use particular learning strategies. It contains 80 items divided into six different strategy groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The SILL items are assessed by using one level of the Likert scale *(never true of me, usually not true of me, somewhat true of me, usually true of me and always true of me).*

Cloze test measured success of the research participants in the English language. Two different cloze tests were designed because our research participants did not have the same prior knowledge of Business English. One was based on the study material which included the text analysed in the Business English 1 course and the other on the text done in the Business English 3 course. Every 7th word in the cloze test was omitted. Both tests were pilot tested with groups of students that did not participate in the research. It had been proven that both cloze tests were reliable and valid instruments to measure success in EFL.

130

## 2.3. Research procedure and methods

The research was conducted in 2010. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, SILL (Oxford, 1990) questionnaire was used to detect students' strategies. The success in EFL was assessed by cloze tests designed for the purpose of the research. What makes the research results specific is the fact that the cloze tests were used in the research to test the knowledge and usage of both Business and General English. We managed to gain a limited yet valuable insight into the strategies used by the students who are learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Statistical methods used in the research were measures of descriptive statistics for all items in the SILL questionnaire and for the answers in the cloze tests (mean, standard variation, minimum and maximum), Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency in every group of learning strategies and linear correlations were used to measure to what extent variables were closely connected. To avoid difficulty in analysing a substantial amount of data on a single item in each learning strategy group, the average value of variables in particular

strategy group was calculated. The threshold of statistical significance for the used instruments was 5% and seldom up to 10% in order to retain all relevant results that indicated that the correlation might be significant.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics results on learning strategies

The SILL questionnaire revealed how frequently the research participants use six different strategy groups (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies). The analysis has shown that the research participants most frequently use compensation strategies. Among eight strategies included in this group, five of them prove a high frequency of usage (above 3.5 on the Likert scale). The highest frequency (4.20) was established for the compensation strategy *If I can't think of an English word, I use the synonym or I describe what I want to say*. There is an interesting opinion regarding compensation strategies and their actual benefit to learning English and to making progress in General English or ESP. Namely, McDonough (1995) expresses his doubt towards the possibility of learning new collocations and terms as well as revealing the meaning of unknown expressions with the help of compensation strategies.

131

The next group of strategies in terms of frequency are cognitive strategies. Four of them had a frequency higher than 3.50 on the Likert scale: *I try to understand what I have heard or read without translating it word-for-word into Croatian* (3.76), *I read a story or dialogue several times until I can understand it* (3.71), *I watch TV shows or listen to the radio in a foreign language* (3.67), *I skim the reading passage first to get the main idea, then I go back and read it more carefully* (3.53).

The following strategies are the ones with a surprisingly low usage frequency and the ones that can be better promoted and trained in Business English classes: *I imitate the way native speakers talk*, *I practice the sounds or alphabet of the new language*, *I take notes in class in the new language*, *I make summaries of new language material* and *I look for patterns in the new language*. The absence of the strategy which includes imitating native speaker might be connected to affective factors that influence students' behaviour in English language classes (e.g. lack of self-confidence and introvert personality, which is predominantly noticed when a student needs to speak in front of fifty or sixty colleagues of his/hers in the seminar group). Practising the sounds of the English alphabet is the strategy mainly used in the initial Business English course and largely neglected in later courses, which might be the reason why we obtained such a result for this strategy.

Furthermore, the fact that the students have an on-line access to student-friendly, well-organised study materials designed by their ESP instructors according to teaching methodology criteria presumably resulted in the low usage frequency of cognitive strategies such as note taking and making summaries. Additionally, ESP instructors have to deal with Generation Y or Millennials in their language classes. Members of this generation are exceedingly dependent on media and digital technologies, which may have influenced their learning strategies used in English classes. However, taking notes, summarising and highlighting, according to Oxford (1990), belong to the structure-generating strategies and they are extremely relevant to a better understanding and manipulation of a foreign language.

In Business English classes the usage of the strategy which involves looking for patterns is regularly encouraged through various vocabulary activities, reading and listening comprehension activities as well as different tasks which include the practice of collocations. Nonetheless, this strategy requires students' cognitive maturity and capability to pick up new language patterns. It is not easy to accomplish the better usage of this strategy unless students are prepared to invest more in achieving a greater autonomy in their language learning process. Thus, the higher usage frequency of this strategy failed to be achieved.

Metacognitive strategies follow the cognitive group of strategies as far as the usage frequency is concerned. Three of them are the most popular ones among the research participants: *I learn from my mistakes in using the new language* (3.87), *I arrange my physical environment to promote learning; for instance, I find a quiet, comfortable place to review* (3.66), and *I evaluate the general progress I have made in learning the language* (3.55). According to Ajideh (2009), metacognitive strategies and autonomous learning are essential for both learning and teaching ESP. A very low usage frequency was found among the examined students for the following metacognitive strategies: *I preview the language lesson to get a general idea of what it is about, how it is organised and how it relates to what I already know* and *I plan what I am going to accomplish in language learning each day or each week*. It is recommended to ESP instructors to promote the use of these two strategies among their students because they, among others, constitute the set of higher order mental strategies, which can generally help improve students' language proficiency.

Metacognitive strategies *I take responsibility for finding opportunities to practice the new language* and *I actively look for people with whom I can speak the new language* also deserve a special attention as the arithmetic mean gained for them was considerably low. The same applies to SILL items 51 (*I decide in advance to pay special attention to specific language aspects; for example, I focus on the way native speakers pronounce certain sounds*) and 52 (*I try to find out all I can about how to be a better language learner by reading books or articles, or by talking to others about how to learn*).

Among memory strategies, three of them were used by the students. They

132

include the following: *When learning a new word, I create associations between new material and what I already know* (3.81), *When learning new material, I review often* (3.52), and *When learning new material, I schedule my reviewing so that the review sessions are initially close together in time and gradually become more widely spread apart* (3.57). Oxford (1990) highlighted that a prerequisite for a higher effectiveness of the use of memory strategies is the ability of language students to concurrently use metacognitive and affective strategies. She stressed here that the metacognitive strategy helped students focus and the affective one helped them reduce anxiety through deep breathing.

Based on the obtained descriptive statistics results we can conclude that social and affective strategies are not the ones that are often used among the research students. Only one social strategy indicates a high usage frequency : *If I do not understand, I ask the speaker to slow down, repeat, or clarify what was said* (3.75). In the context of Business English, social and affective strategies are very useful tools which can facilitate any type of oral communication and in the end should lead to a successful result of any language activity which includes negotiation, discussion in the context of meetings, etc. This corresponds to one of the major learning objectives in Business English classes, i.e. enhancing students' communication skills in the context of the world of business. Hence, to encourage students to use social strategies more often should be one of the main goals of the ESP instructors, in particular the ones who teach Business English.

None of the affective strategies has the frequency higher than 3.50. As we established that these strategies were not popular among our research participants, we can conclude that language lecturers should make changes in this respect. It is presumed that the low usage frequency of the items in this group might be a cultural issue. Nevertheless, improving intrapersonal qualities and skills is a recent trend in the Croatian society. It might facilitate the use of the above mentioned strategies and make their introduction in the ESP classes less burdensome. Thus, ESP lecturers should not hesitate to introduce such strategies to their students. The affective strategies might substantially help students feel relaxed and less pressured in the situation when, for example, they have to give a presentation in front of their colleagues in Business English classes. The same applies to the situation when they have to provide arguments  when discussing the topics analysed in articles included in the course books or supplement materials used in BE classes or issues in case studies, which include real life problems of companies or industries.

The following section shows the results concerning the correlation between six groups of learning strategies and the success our research participants achieved in the cloze tests.

## 3.2. Correlation between learning strategies and success

When the correlation between learning strategies and success in General English and ESP is established, we can see that the only statistically significant correlation is the one between cognitive learning strategies and success (p=0,017) (see Table 1 below). Since the group of cognitive strategies represents the largest group of strategies, it is probable that it managed to satisfy learning preferences of the majority of the research participants. It offered the most effective tools or strategies to learn English and the most acceptable models of behaviour for students. These results are not different from the results obtained by Oxford (1990), who also proved that cognitive strategies were the most popular ones among her students. Additionally, Oxford (1990) stresses that the prevailing function of all cognitive strategies is the transformation and manipulation of a foreign language.

| STRATEGIES | PEARSON CORRELATION | SIG. (2-TAILED) |
|---|---|---|
| memory strategies | -,016 | ,819 |
| cognitive strategies | **,170**\* | **,017** |
| compensation strategies | -,057 | ,428 |
| metacognitive strategies | ,070 | ,326 |
| affective strategies | -,079 | ,270 |
| social strategies | ,038 | ,593 |
| *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).| | |

**Table 1.** Correlation between six groups of learning strategies and success in EFL

It is surprising that the results gained by descriptive statistics show a considerably high usage frequency of each learning strategy group. This leads us to conclude that the higher frequency of use of individual learning strategies or groups of strategies does not always mean greater success in EFL. This can be explained by the fact that research participants did not use the strategies that were effective for them in a certain learning context, or the ones that would be more compatible with their learning styles or preferences. Moreover, they might have been using the strategies more effective for General English and less the ones that might be more useful for ESP, which can be accounted for by the profile of research participants. Namely, the sample did include more first year students than second year students who had more experience in learning Business English. Besides, first year students probably depended on previously acquired learning patterns much more than their colleagues in the second year of studies.

The issue of usage frequency of learning strategies and the progress students make was analysed by one of the most established scholars in this field Anna Uhl Chamot (Chamot et al., 1999). She claimed that usage frequency of language learning strategies (LLS) could not be the only factor analysed in the LLS research. Moreover, Chamot established that less effective learners might use strategies as frequently as their colleagues who were more successful in foreign language learning. Furthermore, Oxford (1989) also emphasised that it was clear that successful language learners behave differently while learning foreign languages. The frequency and the quality of implementing cognitive and metacognitive strategies was not the same among successful and less successful language learners. Results of some researchers (e.g. Griva & Tsakiridou, 2005) prove that students at a lower language level tend to use less productive strategies. They would include word-by-word translating, frequent dictionary use, switching to mother tongue, mime and gestures. Productive and more complicated strategies such as note-taking, summarising, contextualisation, circumlocution, skimming the text and then reading in detail, etc. are used by successful learners. Griva and Tsakiridou (2005) suggest that the usage of productive strategies has to be encouraged in the foreign language classes in order to facilitate the progress of less successful students.

The results we obtained in our research indicated that something was amiss in the process of learning Business English for the students who participated in this research. The fact of the matter is that all of the above mentioned productive strategies were encouraged during Business English classes, but students clearly failed to use the abovementioned strategies effectively and continuously because it seems they did not use them often outside of the classroom. Ostensibly, most of our research participants are not strategic learners, who, as Chamot (2004) explains, possess metacognitive knowledge about their cognitive abilities and the techniques they use to learn. They understand very well what they are required to do for a certain language task. They have the ability to manage the learning strategies which will help them achieve the learning goal and satisfy their learning style. If the majority of them were strategic learners, we would have gained more statistically positive correlations between groups of learning strategies and success in English. Our research results indicate that the students of Economics and Business would benefit from more direct strategy training. Therefore, ESP instructors need to try to encourage students to use learning strategies much more effectively. Continuous input provided by ESP instructors could increase the quality of the use of learning strategies. It should include detailed instructions on using more demanding and more profound cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The latter are exceptionally relevant as they encourage students to control their learning and assess the progress they make.

135

# 4. CONCLUSION

The research results interpreted in this paper should help us get a clearer picture of the process of learning English, in particular Business English, and of variables that can facilitate the progress students make in that process. They should increase our understanding of the correlation between cognitive factors, in our case language learning strategies, and success accomplished both in General English and Business English. The results obtained in our research show a positive correlation only between cognitive strategies and success in EFL. It needs to be emphasised once more that the descriptive statistics results showed the frequent use of learning strategies among the tested students. However, they did not manage to benefit from that. One of the assumptions would be that they use learning strategies incompatible with their learning styles.

The other relevant aspect of the research is the fact that the most of the research participants were just at the beginning of their learning of Business English and it probably made an impact on the results they accomplished in the cloze test. Furthermore, as stated previously, the examined students might have been under the influence of strategies more efficient in learning General English. ESP, hence Business English as well, requires a different approach to language learning and teaching which has to be adapted to the context of ESP. We pointed out that the students should aim at becoming strategic language learners. This requires them to be open to a wider range of learning strategies they will continue to use in future. It also means that the students, as well as their instructors, should not be reluctant to experiment with different combinations of learning strategies. Undoubtedly, it will involve a higher usage frequency of more demanding cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective and social strategies. Hence, it is to be concluded that students lack the awareness of the benefits of learning strategies. Consequently, our research results indicate that ESP instructors at tertiary level in Croatia will have to offer more student-friendly instructions on the effective use of various learning strategies in ESP classes. It will require substantial reorganisation of, at least, a certain number of classes taught by instructors in the Business English courses, or in any other ESP courses for that matter, in the particular study programmes at tertiary level. One of the reasons for a different approach to organising Business English classes, which would include a minimum amount of training on the use of learning strategies, lies not only in the size of the course curriculum but also in the number of students in each class and the fact that lecturers have to deal with mixed ability classes. However, due to the fact that students of Economics and Business will need to improve their social and interpersonal skills, special attention should be paid to the social and affective strategies because they include the tools or techniques that are supposed to improve students' ability to learn through interaction with others and to become more fluent and proficient in affective and social areas of business communication.

Finally, raising the awareness of the benefits of language learning strategies

136

may help students at different language levels, in particular the ones with limited language proficiency, become more proficient. Various combinations of learning strategies should lead to better comprehension and command of English. It is expected that the interpreted results, the ideas and suggestions presented in the paper will encourage ESP instructors to think further about the analysed issues in order to gain other useful information relevant to this area of foreign language teaching and learning.

[Paper submitted 29 Aug 2013]
[Revised version accepted for publication 15 Oct 2013]

## *References*

Ajideh, P. (2009). Autonomous learning and metacognitive strategies essentials in ESP class. *English Language Teaching*, *2*(1), 162-168. Retrieved from http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/354/321.

Chamot, A. U. (2004). Issues in language learning strategy research and teaching. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, *1*(1), 14-26. Retrieved from http://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/v1n12004/chamot.pdf.

Chamot, A. U., Barnhardt, S., El-Dinary, P. B., Robbins, J. (1999). *The learning strategies handbook*. London and New York: Longman.

Gatehouse, K. (2001). Key issues in English for specific purposes (ESP) curriculum development. *The Internet TESL Journal*, *VII*(10), 1-11. Retrieved from http://iteslj.org/Articles/Gatehouse-ESP.html.

Griva, E., & Tsakiridou, H. (2005). Strategies employed by students learning foreign languages for academic purposes. *English for Specific Purposes World*, *4*(3/11). Retrieved from www.esp-world.info/Articles_12/strategies.htm.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learner-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jurkovič, V. (2013). Effect of strategy based instruction on achievement test scores in a mixed language ability group of ESP learners. *Iberica*, *25*, 195-214.

Marentič Požarnik, B., & Mihevc, B. (1997). *Za uspešnejši začetek študija* [Start your studies in the most successful way]. Ljubljana: Center za pedagoško izobraževanje Filozofske fakultete.

McDonough, S. H. (1995). *Strategy and skill in learning a foreign language*. London: Edward Arnold.

Mihaljević-Djigunović, J. (2002). *Strah od stranoga jezika* [Foreign language anxiety]. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak.

Oxford, L. R. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.

Oxford, R. (1989). The best and the worst: an exercise to tap perceptions of language learning experiences and strategies. *Foreign Language Annuals*, *22*, 44-54.

Wong, L. C. & Nunan, D. (2011). The learning styles and strategies of effective language learners. *System*, *39*, 144-163.

**MAGDA PAŠALIĆ** graduated in English and German from the Faculty of Arts, University of Zagreb. She earned a master's degree at the University of Zadar at the postgraduate studies *European studies: Languages and cultures in contact*. She teaches Business English at the Faculty of Economics, University of Split. Her latest work focuses on acquisition of EFL and on discovering what may influence students' progress in that process.

138