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LEARNING STRATEGIES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY. FOCUS ON SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS PREPARING FOR MATURA EXAMINATION

Introduction

In global post-modern society individualism and independence in every aspect of our lives are appreciated and reinforced. Thus, metalinguistic and cognitive aspects of learning related to the didactic process will be discussed and analysed here. The capability of using learning strategies suitable for an individual learning style and personality of a student are understood by the author as the crucial factor of learner autonomy.

This article consists of theory and practice. The theoretical background concerns the process of developing learner autonomy as a result of using various learning strategies. It will provide a series of definitions and the division of strategies as well as the idea of a relatively new 'movement' – 'learner autonomy' – which is perceived in terms of reflection, awareness, self- regulation and self-esteem of a learner. Nevertheless, in the process of developing learner autonomy there may appear psychological problems which may be, to some degree, overcome with the support of a teacher in the conditions of semi-autonomy which is a sort of suggestive way of teaching aimed at giving the students some information 'how to learn'. At the same time, it is believed that with the help of the teacher, showing various ways of solving a problem, it is easier for the learner to recognize his own style which will allow them to choose strategies appropriately for their needs. The problem of linking the strategies with the process of learning 'autonomy' will be analysed from both the teacher and the student's role in the process of learning.

In the second part of the article there are some practical problems discussed, related to teaching in specific conditions while preparing secondary school students for 'matura' exam. The main objective is to sum up the outcome of the research which was carried out among secondary school students preparing for 'matura' exam in terms of independence in strategy use, taking into account stu-

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dents' interests and needs as well as the environment they come from. The main questions concerning the research, carried out among a group of 'matura' students, are: if learning English is a short-term goal or a long-term goal, if they are conscious of their needs, what proportion is between the learners' studying in the lessons and studying on their own, what strategies they actually use on their own and if they are conscious of using them, whether and to what extend they are able to take advantage of the teacher's strategy instructions, if they are able to monitor their results and outcomes and decide about the organization of the next stage of their knowledge.

1. Learning strategies and the process of teaching and learning

1.1. Learning strategies – concepts, terminology and definitions

Learning strategies correspond to learning styles within the language learning process. In this chain, the process has the vastest range within which learning styles are often interchanged with learning strategies. Thus, the usage of different strategies in order to learn a target language successfully depends upon personal features of a learner.

According to Brown, strategies are "… specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information" (Brown 1994: 104). Similarly, Jennifer Ridley associates the term 'strategy' with procedures used by a person as a way of reaching a goal although in her definition Ridley is more interested in learner's capability of solving a problem than training strategies.

> Within the context of learners using a second language, the notion of problematicity is often connected with the term strategy because of the difficulties the learners face in reaching a communicative goal (…) Similarly, within the context of second language learning, the term strategy is often used to denote the difficulty of the learning tasks (Ridley 1997: 63).

Chamot and O'Malley use the term 'learner strategies' for distinguishing those strategies learners had to overwork themselves from 'learning strategies' that can be taught (O'Malley, Chamot 1990). Although Oxford is against distinguishing communication strategies from learning strategies as she claims many scientists relate them only to speaking (Oxford 1990), Tarone and Yule, regard them as an important element of strategic competence apart from learning ones. (Tarone, Jule 1989: 17). Oxford maintains that in order to possess communicative competence which, apart from strategic competence, contains grammar competence, social-linguistic competence and discourse competence, a learner has to use other learning strategies. Cohen, apart from 'learning strategies' distinguishes another type which he calls 'language use strategies'. The former ones are consciously selected by the learner. The latter ones are defined as "processes which

may result in action taken to enhance the use of a second or a foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about the language" (Cohen 1998: 4). A distinction is being made between that language material which is learned to some extent consciously by using learning strategies and material which is acquired with little control, and which is more 'automatized' language learning, connected with output where language use strategies play the main role.

Another problem pertains to the absence of consensus as to whether strategies need to be conscious. Basing her argument on the case of young children who seem to behave strategically, Bialystok refers to the children's capability of making choices although they are not aware of it (Bialystok 1993). However, Chamot in her research proved that even young children were capable of describing strategies used by them (O'Malley, Chamot 1990). According to Schmidt conscious behavior of a learner, without any difference if he or she performs focally or peripherally, could be termed as a strategy but if the behaviour is so unconscious that a learner is not able to identify any strategies, then the behavior would be referred as a process (Schmidt 1990).

Moreover, William and Burden claim that strategy can be treated as series of skills, which are used for a particular language learning purpose. In this understanding strategies concern planning, choosing particular skills and the sequence of their application as well as controlling the whole process and possible changes of the plans (Williams, Burden 1997).

> Nisbet and Schucksmith place strategies at a higher level than skills, the former acting as 'executive processes' that coordinate and apply skills. Thus, learning strategies tend to be unobservable mental processes, while study skills are more overt techniques, such as keeping one's class notes in a logical order. Referring specifically to language learning, Ellis and Sinclair suggest that study skills are product oriented, learning strategies are process oriented (Graham 1997: 37).

Thus, learning strategies are defined as activities, behaviours, steps and techniques by Oxford (Oxford 1990) or 'means' by Bialystok conducing better internalizing, storage, performance and application of the target language or developing language competence while using it (Bialystok 1993).

> Some of the strategies are behavioral which can be easily observable, others are mentalistic and not directly observable. In addition, strategies are sometimes labeled to 'successful learners' or 'unsuccessful learners, when, in fact, the effectiveness of a strategy may depend largely on the characteristics of the given learner, the given language structure, the given context, or the interaction of these (Cohen 1998: 12).

Taking into account all the views concerning strategies, being presented in literature, strategies refer both to the general ways of a learning approach as well as specific activities, comprise behaviour or mental activities or both of them, support learning both directly and indirectly, contribute to the main goal which is

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communicative competence, they are problem-oriented and allow learners to become more self-directed, they also expand the role of teachers as they can be taught, they are often conscious but flexible, influenced by a variety of factors (Oxford 1993).

1.2. The classification of learning strategies

Many language learning strategy classification systems have been divided into various groups, for example systems related to successful learners by Rubin, systems based on psychological functions by O'Malley and Chamot, linguistically based systems dealing with guessing, language monitoring, formal and functional practice by Bialystok or systems related to separate language skills by Cohen as well as systems based on different styles or types of learners by Sutter (http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/oxford01.html). Nevertheless the most detailed and vastest classification, based on the analysis of strategies used by successful learners, was elaborated by Oxford (Brown 1994: 132-133).

In this typology the strategies are divided into classes , groups and sets of strategies. There are two classes of strategies: direct, which involve the subject matter directly and indirect, which do not directly involve the subject matter itself, but are necessary in language learning.

The direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Memory strategies help enter information into long-term memory and retrieve information for communication. Cognitive strategies are "used for forming and revising internal mental models and receiving and producing messages in the target language" (Oxford 1990: 71). Compensation strategies are needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge, for example overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. In the case of speaking there are: getting help, using mime or gesture, adjusting or approximating the message, coining words, using a circumlocution or synonyms.

The following groups of strategies: metacognitive, social and affective belong to the indirect strategy class. The first group helps learners to exercise control over their own learning through planning, arranging, focusing, monitoring and evaluating. Social strategies are "those activities learners engage in which afford them opportunities to be exposed to and practice their knowledge ... [the strategies] put the student in an environment where practice is possible" (Ellis, Sinclair 1989: 27).

Taking into account communication strategies, it is necessary to distinguish them from learning strategies as they pertain to the employment of verbal or non-verbal mechanisms for the productive communication or information while the previous ones deal more with receptive domain of intake, memory, storage, and recall. Although many scientists claim that "(...) it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them two, since comprehension and production can occur almost simultaneously..." (Brown 1994: 127), researchers associate communication strategies both with their compensatory nature and strategic competence.

Strategic competence illustrates the usage of various strategies on a higher level of a learning process, and is used by Canale and Swain in terms of communicative language (Canale, Swain 1980: 29-30). However Bachman and Palmer seemed to solve the problem providing a broader theoretical model for viewing strategic competence. The authors conceive it as "a set of metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use" (Cohen 1998: 14). Thus, metacognitive strategies are used for determining the language needed to perform the given task, but cognitive strategies – for selecting appropriate language structures. In the process, mentioned above, a learner deals with strategies for planning how to accomplish the task, and finally post-task assessment strategies.

1.3. The influence of personality on the choice of strategies

Personality has a great influence on a student's motivation and learning techniques used by him. It is also, apart from emotions and attitudes toward learning a language, an affective factor conditioning learner success. On the basis of personality, also taking into account intelligence and language capabilities, it is possible to distinguish cognitive and learning styles which refer to preferences within an individual. The former ones are a sort of a link between cognition and personality whereas the latter refer to physiological and affective factors.

Styles are defined by Brown as

(…) general characteristics of intellectual functioning and personality type that especially pertain to you as an individual, that differentiate you from someone else. For example you might be more visually oriented, more tolerant of ambiguity or more reflective than anyone else- these would be styles that characterize the general pattern in your thinking or feeling (Brown 1994: 113).

There are various classifications of styles elaborated by different scientists: Bachmayer, while discussing factors influencing quality and time in which students are able to acquire a foreign language as well as their individual language capabilities, motivation, psychological stability, emotions and language empathy, presents a very simple typology: reflective versus active students, field dependent versus field independent learners, students storing versus students processing language data (Pfeiffer 2001: 101). Brown adds some more categories: left- and right-brain functioning, ambiguity tolerance and visual versus auditory styles (Brown 2000: 118-121). In her analysis of the learners' styles Hanna Komorowska distinguishes visual, auditory and kinesthetic types of learners (according to modality), and also extraverts and introverts as well as risk-takers versus non risk-takers, taking into account their personal features (Pfeiffer 2001: 102-103).

Reflective learners tend to think more about 'how to do it' before starting solving a problem whereas active students prefer to 'try it out and see how it works'. A balance of the two is desirable. If you always act before reflecting you

can jump into things prematurely and get into trouble, while if you spend too much time reflecting you may never get anything done. Field dependent learners, according to Pfeiffer, have troubles with recognizing structures as well as using audiovisual aids and concentration whereas field independent learners can think analytically, are more concentrated in the learning process and easily recognize structures (Pfeiffer 2001: 104). At the same time students storing given language material are field dependent but those who process the given material are more independent and active.

Abraham found that second language learners who were field independent performed better in deductive lessons while those with field dependent styles were more successful in inductive lesson designs. The second of the conflicting hypotheses leads us to conclude that primary field dependent persons will, by virtue of their empathy, social outreach , and perception of other people, be successful in learning the communicative aspects of a second language (Brown 1994: 107).

As far as left or right brain dominance is taken into consideration, there is a need to remind that the left hemisphere is responsible for logical analytical thought whereas the right one remembers auditory, visual and tactile images so, at the same time, is efficient in processing holistic information.

Visual learners tend to prefer studying diagrams, charts and drawings while an auditory style is characterized by a preference for listening to lectures and cassettes. The techniques that help visual types in learning are mainly highlighting, noting, key words. Auditory types need more participation in discussions, prefer working within a group during classes. The tactile or kinesthetic type best learns when physically involved in a 'hands on' activity. In the classroom he benefits from a lab setting where he can manipulate materials to learn new information. Apart from learning preferences scientists claim that this style category depends to some extend on cultural and linguistic background.

Learning style often determines the choice of learning strategies. For example, analytic-style students prefer such strategies like contrastive analysis, rule-learning, and dissecting words and phrases, while global students use strategies to find meaning (guessing, scanning, predicting) and to converse without knowing all the words (paraphrasing, gesturing). Other factors that decide about the choice of strategies are: motivation – highly motivated students tend to use more strategies than less motivated students, gender – in many studies females show greater overall strategy use than males, cultural background, attitudes and beliefs as well as age – the more advanced or older students the more strategies often being employed by them.

2. Learner autonomy

2.1. The idea of learner autonomy

Autonomy and independence have become a priority in language learning in the last two decades as a result of changes in curricula and methods of teaching

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towards a more learner-centred kind of learning. It is a dynamic process in which a learner is expected to become mature, reflective and aware of the choice of strategies he uses preferably with the help of a teacher who should be an initiator, a trainer and a controller in the process. At the same time, at any stage, learners differ in their interests, attitudes, beliefs, motivation and needs, and develop varying degrees of independence throughout their lives.

Nowadays learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for their own learning. Autonomy of a learner is regarded as:

> (…) a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the ways the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little 1991: 4).

There are some aspects of learner autonomy appearing in the above definition by Little in Ridley's comment on it. First of all, learners develop their own approach to learning, secondly, "learners' capacity for reflective decision-making is relevant to how they approach task performance and (…) how they seek to resolve actual problems which may arise" (Ridley 1997: 19), and finally the term 'learner autonomy' is also associated with metacognitive skills – planning, evaluating and monitoring. Thus,

> the basis of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning. The development of learner autonomy depends on the exercise of that responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning , and with what degree of success and the effect of learner autonomy is to remove the barriers that so easy erect themselves between formal learning and the wider environment in which the learner lives (Cotterall, Crabbe 1999: 11).

Besides, the term 'autonomy' is 'a flag for the change' which is being achieved in the process of learning by those who are actively engaged in its promotion. The above statement introduces a sort of politics into the term. Holec claims that autonomy is concerned with adult learners and the purpose of their education is to prepare the individual to participate in democratic processes. According to Janne, adult education should be "an instrument for arousing the increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man and (…) an instrument for changing the environment itself" (Holec 1981: 3). Both these definitions mentioned above suggest that learner autonomy is 'Western cultural construct'. Nevertheless, there are some contradictory responds to these suggestions, for example Strawson's claim of 'sense of the self' which he defines as "the sense that people have of themselves as being, specifically, a mental presence, a mental someone, a conscious subject that has a certain character or personality, and is distinct from all its particular experiences, thoughts, hopes, wishes, feelings and so on" (Strawson 1996: 21). Goody confirms that individualism is a human inborn feature as

"effective social living requires anticipation of the actions of others" (Goody 1995: 2). Vygotsky adds that "(…) higher cognitive functions develop in the child as internalizations of social functions" (Vygotsky 1981: 163). Thus, anticipatory planning sets challenges that the child faces in the process of socialization. In this way his autonomy as well as intelligence increases. Following these arguments, David Little calls learner autonomy 'a universal human capacity'(Little 1991). It means that the most successful learners are autonomous. Autonomy has always existed and it can develop independently of teachers. It suggests that learner autonomy could state for a special set of capacities available through developmental learning. The process of acquiring a language begins in a mind with implicit knowledge which gradually becomes explicit.

Besides, learning is called 'the product of social interaction' by Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1981: 163). The way we talk to children-as-learners determines the kind of learners they will become. The effect of learner autonomy is simply removing the barriers between formal learning and the environment in which the learner functions. 'Pedagogy for autonomy' at school demands shifting interrelationship between teacher and learner roles. If students are to learn to 'take control', the teacher needs to learn to 'let go' even if he provides structures and vocabulary (http://www.euro-pal.net/GetResource?id=34). The promotion of learner autonomy is hidden under the term 'teacher autonomy'. There are different types of learning and teaching, at first it is formal, then developmental, finally – experiential and reflective. In order to be able to understand and advise the students teachers should be involved in different investigative activities, stating problems which raise pupils' attention and awareness of learning. At the same time teachers need to reflect on their own role in the classroom while monitoring students' behaviour. In this way teachers and students can learn together and together become more empowered in the course of pedagogy for autonomy.

2.2. Problems with learner autonomy – semi-autonomy

The degree to which learners understand and manage learning determines the level of autonomy and success. Here, the social context is a key factor. Nature versus nurture determines the styles of our learning. Our explicit knowledge depends both on environmental and genetic factors provided there are no psychological or affective factors which may also enable us to take up control over learning. Autonomy offers readiness for taking up responsibility for the process of learning which should not be an alternative or a privilege, but the right of a unit to learn. On one hand, it serves freedom but, on the other one, requires self confidence and emotional maturity which respectively enable adequate self-esteem.

In spite of inevitable advantages of autonomous learning in psychological understanding many people, particularly adults, do not willingly take up the control of learning a foreign language. They expect the full control of the process from the

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teacher. There appear particular ego-defensive processes preventing foreign language learners from taking responsibility for their learning outcomes. Two areas are related to the ways in which individuals perceive themselves; attribution theory within which external and internal locus of control and their motivational and affective consequences are taken into account. A locus of control orientation is a belief that the outcomes of our actions are dependent on what we do which is internal control orientation or on events outside our personal control called external control orientation. Thus, people with an internal locus of control believe that in order to get a reward they have to do their best, these individuals fully control the process of their educational 'career', and are often observed to excel in vocational realms, while those with an external locus of control believe that their own behaviour does not matter much and that rewards in life are generally outside of their control. They would rather see luck than effort as a factor determining whether they succeed or fail. In a situation of defeat they are more likely to view themselves as the victim.

Self-defence mechanisms are aimed at maintaining self-esteem. That is why we tend to associate success with internal factors but at the same time we perceive a defeat as a consequence of external events. There are also individual differences in the amount of control we decide to take over. Optimists tend to take more control and have an ability not to blame themselves if something goes wrong. Instead, they look for other solutions and never withdraw. Nevertheless, there are also many examples of learners who in spite of their effort will never succeed as they lose their control because of insufficient competence. This notion is called 'learned helplessness' (http://www.noogenesis.com/malama/discouragement/helplessness.html). There are different syndromes connected with this psychological state; motivational deficit which leads to apathy, emotional deficit or depression as well as low esteem.

Another hypothesis – self-worth theory, elaborated by Covington and Omelich, is more popular among adolescents and adults. Here, effort is a risk as learner does not want to admit his lack of intellectual abilities. This kind of behaviour is aimed at maintaining high self-esteem. According to this theory people being afraid of taking over the responsibility for their own process of learning blame it on their age, lack of time or simply repeat still functioning stereotypes claiming that one can learn a language only abroad. They often regard teachers as incompetent making them fully responsible for the process of learning of their students (Covington 1992).

Here, motivation is a very important factor, which is defined by Brown as "commonly thought of as inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action" (Brown 1994: 152). In this understanding, although a teacher has a great influence on maintaining or enhancing motivation, he cannot be the only source of motivation. Nevertheless, in order to motivate a learner the needs of a learner should be respected: a need for exploration, manipulation,

activity, stimulation, knowledge and ego enhancement. For the better understanding of a learner, different types of motivation are distinguished. For example, integrative motivation which is the desire to identify with the target language, culture and society contrasted to instrumental one which is the wish to learn the language for purposes of study or career promotion. Another distinction is that between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, both of these have an important part to play in the classroom, and to a certain extent are accessible to the teacher influence. The first one is the urge to engage in the learning activity for its own sake whereas the second is derived from external incentives. Besides, Brown distinguishes global motivation – meaning the overall orientation of the student towards the learning process, situational, which has to do with the context of learning-classroom as well as total environment and the latter one, task-oriented, the approach of the learner to specific tasks (Brown 2000: 162-164).

The real problem appears when a learner is not motivated. Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis explains that a number of 'affective variables' play a facilitative or depressing, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition. He claims that

> learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition (http://www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html).

In other words, if the filter is high it disturbs language acquisition. On the other hand, a positive effect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

For emphasizing that language is both affective and cognitive task there is a must to mention learners' attitudes towards it. Apart from 'affective variables' there are also social variables. Two kinds of attitudes are crucial; learners' role in the learning process, and their capability as learners. If learners believe that they are such personality types that are not able to learn a language they are fighting a 'loosing battle'. The next factor determining learner success is self esteem which is the evaluation the learner makes of himself. Low self esteem leads to negative attitudes towards language.

All the problems and psychological mechanisms described above may be changed but they demand special training which should be applied by teachers in a classroom environment. The key idea of 'interventionist' programs is expecting success as the main factor influencing learner motivation. Thus, the aim of the teacher is to develop motivation by determining short-termed goals which would be easy to achieve as well as rewarding progress in learning if gained by heart. Sometimes it is difficult to change stereotypes concerning learning that still function among adults. That is why, autonomy should be developed since the very be-

ginning while discussing school education and should concern every subject. This is school which should promote individualism and capability of self-study.

A new trend concerning institutional teaching/learning process appeared and is called 'semi-autonomy' or 'gradual didactics'. It is mainly embedded on the 'didactic relation' which is a relation between a learner and a teacher. Didactics in semi-autonomy is pragmatic which means that all activities taken up are concentrated on efficiency. Semi-autonomy is aimed at the development of students' linguistic competence and also their personal communicative style and positive attitude. Autonomy is a question of degree and one of its levels is semi-autonomy. For the comparison of the terms Dickinson presents the stages in such a way:

> Self-instruction – generally refers to situations in which learner works without the direct control of the teacher, self-direction- (...) specific attitude facing the learning assignment, in which the student accepts the responsibility in deciding about his/her learning but does not necessarily commit himself to the implementation of the decisions, autonomy- this term refers to the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions made either in regards to his learning or the implementation of these decisions. In complete autonomy there is no teacher instructor involvement. (...) Semi-autonomy- conveniently denominates the stage in which the students are preparing for autonomy. Self-access learning- means self-instruction through the use of varied materials. (...), individualized instruction- instruction where a learning process in relation to objectives, content, methodology and rhythm is adapted to a specific individual... (Dickinson 1987: 11).

In response to the previously described problems in school conditions, especially in the case of students who do not tend to be autonomous, it is possible to increase the efficiency of learning/teaching process by activities aimed at teaching 'how to learn'. It demands changing the traditional role of a teacher, who can not be both like a doctor setting diagnosis and prescribing medicines and at the same time like a pharmacist realizing the prescriptions, because in this situation a learner would be a passive patient simply consuming the medicines. This is a classical example of helping the learner in 'learned helplessness'. Even in guided teaching the learner easily gets engaged in the process of learning taking into consideration his own aims and strategies or techniques used by him in order to succeed. There are two types of autonomy: language autonomy which is free creative using of language in new situations thanks to positive transfer of the learned contents, and methodological autonomy understood as cognitive independence of the learner in rational self-directness of his own process of learning which can be achieved by the learner thanks to the teacher-instructor. Evolution in changing of the pupils' attitudes concerns three spheres: language culture-functioning of the language, learning culture-comprising learning strategies and the notion 'how to learn', learning methodology-techniques of preparing and solving tests and tasks.

Pupils are encouraged to study a target language not only in lessons, but also by taking advantages of different situations, for example: listening to the radio,

watching TV, using internet for contacts with internet pals, reading and possibly talking to foreigners. It is crucial for the teacher to be able to link the institutional demands to the needs of the students, so there is a necessity to choose subjects the learners are interested in. Autonomous learner must feel that he takes part in the decisions. It is worth to allow them to discover styles they represent. On the other hand, students should be aware of the necessity of flexibility in learning which means trying new techniques, strategies and methods. The next phase to autonomy is teaching creativity. Holistic education is based on the thesis that mind and body make one system, thus a learner is supposed to study both cognitively and emotionally.

Creativity and autonomy lead to self-access study. Factors determining autonomous learner are intellectual interests: reflexivity, creativity, consciousness, self-access study, cognitive independency-criticism, not being afraid of new challenges and activities, metacognitive skills; planning and organizing the job, positive emotional control, capability of cooperation, awareness of his own aims, high self-esteem, high motivation, low anxiety, capability of self-evaluation.

3. Learning strategies and the process of developing learner autonomy

Strategies belong to a technical part of language teaching and learning process. They are used both by a learner and a teacher at every stage of the process. In spite of the factors ranging from personality to the cultural context in which learners find themselves and which help them to embrace autonomy, the notion can also be fostered by systematically incorporating strategy training into the learning process. Scholars, while talking about autonomy, always point out at strategies as the main condition for developing independence and efficiency in learning. They strongly recommend the introduction of strategy instruction training at schools. There are different options for providing strategy training. It depends on the teacher or the institution which model will be chosen for their students taking into account their age, the level of English, settings and the type of school they attend. Each model differs in the level of explicitness of the training, the level of students' awareness of the practical applications of the strategies and the level of integration of strategies into the curriculum.

Two leading models are: a strategy based instruction model by Cohen and an awareness raising approach by Nunan, Lai and Keobke. The first one is defined by its author as "(...) a learner-centred approach to teaching that focuses on explicit and implicit inclusion of language learning and language use strategies in the L2 classroom. The goal of strategy training is to explicitly teach students how, when, and why strategies can be used to facilitate their efforts at learning and using a foreign language" (Cohen 1998: 69). A further goal of strategy training is to promote learner self-direction by letting students choose their own strategies more spontaneously. Besides, SBI helps students monitor and evaluate their learn-

ing progress and effectiveness, and also develop their problem-solving skills. It is aimed at teaching strategies in a direct manner embedded in tasks relevant to learners' needs. Cohen divided SBI into two stages: strategy instruction – teaching the learners how, when, and why strategies are used to facilitate language learning and strategy integration-meaning that "strategies are integrated (…) into everyday classroom activities to provide for contextualized strategy practice and reinforcement" (Blanche, Merino 1989: 314). Teachers who decided to implement SBI training for their learners should, at first, determine the students' needs and available recourses and elicit students' goals in order to apply their strategies more effectively expanding the material in creative ways. Then, they need to make their own curriculum in which strategy training would be inserted. After that, materials and activities should be appropriately fitted to this type of curriculum with the allowance of the learners to choose alternative material. After finishing SBI course it is worth evaluating the results according to the following criteria: students' performance across language tasks and skills, their reactions to instruction and teacher feedback.

Nunan, Lai and Keobke in their awareness-raising approach project focused on the effect of SBI on learner's sensitivity to learning process and skills, how effective SBI is in encouraging learners to reflect, monitor, self-organize and self-direct within a learning process and the effect of guided critical reflection on the development of particular skills. At the very beginning the students were given journals in order to force them to reflect on their own learning; develop their knowledge about strategies used by them and assess their progress. There were four categories of tasks during this project; those which focused on general aspects, those which encouraged students to focus on different modes of learning, including whole class work, individualized work, pair and group work and learning beyond the classroom, the next category of tasks concerned the macro skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking and the last group of tasks focused on language systems; pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and discourse. During the course students easily shifted from linguistic focus to communicative, they began to control their own process of learning, they tended to adopt more 'process-oriented' than 'product-oriented' approach to learning.

Lai wanted to show the impact of guided critical reflection on the capacity for self-directing students' own process of learning within a learning skill and concerned listening activities. A guided listening journal was 'designed' to direct students' attention around such problems like selecting materials, setting of listening problems and conducting self-assessment. Learner diary was to help develop student reflection through their personal reaction to the learning activity and the outcome as well as suggestions for future action.

There are also other forms of teaching strategies and classroom activities enhancing autonomy, for example peer tutoring or tandem programs. There are both individual meetings or exchanges within school or university projects. The stu-

dents have regular meetings on which they alter their roles of both learner and teacher and the two languages are practiced. Participants of such a form of finding learning/teaching strategies are less stressful than on regular class sessions. This is also an opportunity for cultural exchange. Another method of organizing peer sessions for students are regular target language study groups, for example German-Polish youth practicing English. The teacher here is responsible for organizing such sessions as well as preparing materials for the students and possibly controlling their progress. The advantages of such a course are that the weaker students may benefit from the better ones, besides, students are encouraged to discover strategies to solve particular tasks. There is also a possibility to use language textbooks with strategies inserted in them. Thus, a role of a language instructor is to discuss the ways of solving a particular exercise. The activities are contextualized with language learning, so learners can develop their learning strategy while learning the target language. The advantages of this way of strategy training is no need of extracurricular training, in addition, these textbooks reinforce strategy use across tasks and skills.

4. The analysis of 'matura' exam

4.1. The procedures and structure of "nowa matura" exam

'Nowa Matura' was introduced in order to assure uniformity of tasks and evaluation criteria, objectivity of evaluation and comparison of the results which allows it to be the entrance university exam. The English examination consists of the internal part – which is an oral exam, conducted in front of the examination board and the external part – a written part conducted inside the school, but assessed by the Regional Examination Board (OKE – Okręgowa Komisja Egzaminacyjna). The exam can be taken on one of the two levels: basic or extended. In this paper the basic level will be a subject of analysis as most of the students chose it. The oral exam on the basic level lasts 10 minutes. Additionally, there is 5-minute time for the student to prepare for it. The exam is composed of two tasks. Within the first task there are three guided conversations: receiving or telling information, reporting the events and negotiating. The second task contains an illustration which should be discussed together with two questions asked by the examiner.

The written exam consists of three parts; listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing. 'Listening comprehension' consists of 2 – 3 recorded texts together with the tasks printed on the paper, each of them is played twice with breaks for completing the tasks. The recorded texts are announcements, interviews, pieces of instruction or short narratives. The second part in the first paper of the exam on the basic level is reading comprehension comprising 1 – 3 texts. The texts are authentic: newspaper articles, leaflets, adverts, advertisements, forms, questionnaires, statements, the news, weather reports, interviews, com-

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ments, letters, stories, anecdotes, literary and journalist texts. Writing is the third part. The students must be capable of writing short every day texts, for example a party invitation, an advertisement, a postcard, a message or a questionnaire to fill in. The second task in this part is a longer useful written form (100 – 150 words) which is most often a letter: formal or informal. The written exam on the basic level lasts 120 minutes.

4.2. Skills and tasks requiring different learning strategies

Matura students while being tested have to be able to use strategies in order to approach different skills: listening, reading, writing in the written part and speaking in the oral part. The listening and reading parts of 'matura' paper comprise the following types of exercises: matching, sequencing, fill-in, multiple choice and true-false. The accompanying skill is their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary at least on the pre-intermediate level. The following problem of testing is the students' awareness of being assessed. Thus, testing strategies play here the important role.

According to Cohen "Tests are assessing limited aspects of language, and in some cases not even that , but rather just the ability to 'psyche out' the test" (Cohen 1998: 215). While analysing the strategies required for solving tests, Cohen finds two test performance opposing ones called by him 'test-wiseness strategies' and 'not-so-wise strategies' which are a sort of tricks how to solve tests. First of all the students should know the structure of 'matura' test: skills and types of tasks, then they have to organize, manage and control the process of taking the test. It means that students should avoid spending too much time on 'plodding' through material causing problems and time-consuming. Jumping to these easiest items and then returning to those more difficult ones is better for them in order to complete as much as possible. Thus, the language test performance is not only based on the knowledge of a language they possess but also on their 'test wiseness'.

Taking into account particular test components it is said in many literature sources that while doing listening tasks students use mainly cognitive strategies such as summarizing, contextualization and inferencing, but also planning and the task result evaluation belonging to metacognitve ones. Additionally, it is observed that the students use guessing, which is a compensation strategy as well as elaborating, keywords and associating belonging to memory strategies. Reading requires skimming, using the clues and guessing from the context. Besides, both cognitive and metacognitive strategies play an important role here as the former ones are used directly, in order to solve a particular problem and the latter ones are connected with the management of reading, thus, allow the student to take control of the process of reading. Writing and speaking are productive skills which require creativity, knowledge of grammar structures and appropriate reservoir of

vocabulary depending on the level of English the exam is taken on. Metacognitive strategies are predominant in both skills as they are based on creating new ideas and constructing meaning. Each of these skills is a process of solving problems, thus setting the aim and explaining are present here, but also borrowing, avoiding and omitting will be apparent. In the case of writing there is a possibility of self--correction. In the case of speaking, the process happens faster so self-control and self-evaluation will be limited here. Additionally, many speaking strategies concern pronunciation.

On the whole, test strategies have compensatory nature, so strategic competence is very useful as a component of communicative language use together with its compensatory strategies used to compensate for lack in some language area. At times, a limited amount of strategies is good as it means that one has control over a given item provided those strategies are well-chosen and effective. Nevertheless, it is necessary to possess more strategies in order to do the whole test successfully. The more strategies you know the better choice you will make in order to solve the given task faster and more efficiently. This framework of strategies includes a goal-setting component – deciding what to do and in what order, an assessment component – assessing what is needed in order to do a task and how well it has been done, and a planning component – deciding how to use the topic knowledge and language knowledge that is given.

5. Matura' students from the Secondary School in Rzepin – learner autonomy and learning strategies research

5.1. The aims, procedures and methods of the action research

The action research is mainly aimed at checking to what extent the students are able to take advantage of the strategy instruction training presented both in their student's book and introduced by the teacher in the classroom as the element of the integrated learner training. The assumptions of the learner training are the development of students' awareness, reflectivity and ability to solve tests 'automatically' by using various strategies having been presented to them.

The data include the students' sex, age, style of learning, environment they come from, their needs and attitudes towards learning English, the type of motivation they represent as well as experiences and expectations related to the language learning. The factors which influence their success in learning the target language are their conditions for learning the language; the school or other institutions, the time they spend on their own language study as well as their own choice of methods and strategies they use in learning. Of course the inevitable basis for their successful language learning is an appropriate curriculum, personal qualities and the competence of the teacher, classroom methods of teaching English and teaching 'how to learn'. The outcome will include the description of the

strengths and weaknesses of the students after the 'learner training' which has been conducted among them within the action research, as well as the responses to the questions stated above and also the comparison of the results of 'sample matura' exams, being held in January and in April, 2006.

The techniques and instruments used within the action research method conducted among the secondary school 'matura' students are: questionnaires, introspection and observation. Most of the research study is based on the elicitation method, the instrument of which are the questionnaires distributed among the students which include a mixture of closed and open questions with the majority of closed ones as the responses to them are easier to collate and analyse. Some of the questions are the combination of a closed question and an open question demanding a comment. The questionnaire paper contains 28 questions concerning personal data, learner autonomy in order to get to know how autonomous the students are, autonomy in the classroom – as the source of information collected from students concerning the atmosphere and their feelings in the classroom as well as the methods used by the teacher in the lessons, strategies the students use both during the lessons and on their own, the teacher, the level of students' dependence on her, the methods used by her, the emotional feelings in the relations between the teacher and students and their attitudes towards matura exam. The collected data were calculated according to quantifying qualitative data technique. In order to check what strategies the students use, the introspection technique was introduced as the element of the research.

5.2. The target group

The target group consists of 25 students learning at the Stanisław Staszic Secondary School in Rzepin, 52% of whom are female and 48% are male. They are representatives of the class preparing for 'matura' exam at the age of 18 – 19. Most of them come from small towns – 80%. The remaining persons, namely 5 (20%), live in villages. Most of them – 32% – have been learning English for 8 years and 28 % for 7 years. In general they declare that they are interested in English. However, the biggest number of people are interested a little in the language – 56%, another 40% are interested much. Most people decided to take the English 'matura' exam on the basic level.

The level of English the students represented when they entered the school was elementary which was proved by the placement test conducted among them at the beginning of the English course. The student's book they used in the first class, (chosen by the teacher), was *Opportunities – Elementary*. In the second class they continued with the *Opportunities – Pre-intermediate* course using the second part of the book. In the third class, the students used *Matura z języka angielskiego – Repetytorium*, containing all skills and types of tasks necessary for passing the exam, also including example examination tests and oral examination

sets. In order to make the course more holistic and the lessons more interesting I used authentic materials: articles from different magazines, for example: *Newsweek, The Guardian, Reward* resourse pack containing puzzles, quizzes, lexical and grammar games and crosswords on the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels, grammar books, for example: Murphy's *Grammar in Use. Reference and Practice for Intermediate Students of English*, as well as Internet materials.

5.3. The outcome data analysis

Analysing the outcome data on the basis of my own research I observe many similarities in using strategies by the students with those used by respondents in literature. The strategies the students from the target group use were checked by introspection research technique, questionnaire and observation. The introspection gave me the best image of the students' strategy usage concerning reading and writing components. First of all, they analyze the instructions and questions carefully, then they skim the text and later look the answers up in the text dividing it into fragments, for instance analyzing each paragraph separately. They check the answers once more if they have time. There is observed a planning component, a time component and an assessment component which point out at using metacognitive strategies as well as cognitive strategies concerning certain steps the students approach while doing the given task. In the case of writing, a longer useful form was analyzed by the students within introspection. They mention reading the information the given task is based on, reminding the structure as well as expressions, vocabulary and key words suitable for the composition they are supposed to write, planning the number and content of the paragraphs, then they check what they created. On one hand, some of the structures used by students are practiced in the lessons so the students are familiar with the suitable expressions, but on the basis on my observations of the students in the lessons, I conclude that they also use compensation strategies apart from the memory ones. For example, using a circumlocution, synonyms, antonyms, paraphrasing, borrowing and avoiding. Nevertheless the students' preferences concerning writing point out that they need more practice as they feel better while writing guided forms, for instance letters with instructions than compositions on a given topic such as essays.
That is why most of them chose basic level of 'matura' exam.

As far as speaking strategies are taken into consideration, I could observe during the oral matura exam that the students precisely planned their statements. Besides, they used mainly compensation strategies like avoiding, borrowing and paraphrasing. While preparing for the oral exam it was visible that most of them took notes, some students even highlighted the most important things they wanted to say. The tasks require many cognitive skills apart from the metacognitive ones such as deduction, grouping, contextualization, elaboration, transfer and inferencing.

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The ability to describe the strategies the students use by themselves confirms that they possess certain strategic competence. The progress in developing their strategies was observed by the teacher from October till April, 1996 while the strategy training course was the important element during the lessons. The comparison of the results of the tests taken in October and in April show a great improvement of the students' capabilities of the test performance. The average percent per one student was 56,5 in October while in April it was 71,7. The percentage increase of the results was about 15%. At the same time the students' level of independence and consciousness went up.

The questionnaire data show that most of the students – over a half – treat the teacher as an adviser, not organizer of their study, thus they become more and more responsible for their study. At the same time they perceive the teacher as an autonomous and helping person. The majority of the students are not afraid of asking the teacher questions and feel that they have 'free style' in the lessons which means that they are given a choice of what to do. In this way they can wonder over their withdraws concerning 'matura' test taking and improve those skills they want. Nevertheless about 40% of the students seem not to have long-term goals connected with the language learning. They are simply interested in passing the 'matura' exam and mainly do 'matura' tests and tasks. It seems that they do not learn holistically, but rather schematically. In fact, I feel that the 'matura' exam also forces both the students and the teacher to perform schemas in the lessons. There is very little creativity in comparison with the previous 'matura' test and it does not give the teacher many possibilities to teach creatively as the main aim is to prepare the students for taking the schematic test. On the other hand there is no time to do many additional activities.

On one hand, the students are able to organize, self-manage and direct their own study while the 'matura' test is practiced as they learned to do many activities related to test performance automatically, but, on the other one, not all of them show much interest in other activities which they should discover themselves in order to improve their level of English in general. Those people who try to find other means of having contact with the language itself and the environment of the native speaking subjects mainly choose media and internet. Only two persons have contacts with English-speaking friends and go abroad. The reason may be the environment the students come from – small towns and villages, where the access to internet is minimal. Moreover, there are some students with very low self-esteem and probably the syndrome of 'learned helplessness'. They do not feel good at communicating in English, because they believe they have to go abroad in order to be able to communicate in English fluently. In this way, they use their self-defense mechanisms to maintain their self-esteem.

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ABSTRACT

This paper views foreign language learning strategies as constituting those processes which are consciously selected by autonomous learners and which may result in actions taken to enhance the learning or use of the target language, through storage, retention, recall, and application of information about the language. The strategies are divided according to different schools with particular indication of Oxford's classification. The practical part of this paper, contains the outcome data based on the action research having been conducted among the 'matura' students from the Staszic Secondary School in Rzepin in correlation with the literature analysis, the main aim of which was to prove to what degree the strategy instruction training introduced in the lessons influences the development of the students while preparing for 'matura' exam.