

Description of Learning Strategies and Socio-Cultural Background Influence on the Productive Skills of Turkish and Bosnian Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the learning strategies and the influence of socio-cultural background on the language learning Turkish and Bosnian students. Although they have a lot of similarities in their culture and traditions, these two nationalities have different language learning environments related to the regions they live and as a result, English language learning levels are different than each other. This paper deals with the importance of socio-cultural influence on the learners' strategies of productive skills. The more we discover about the language learning strategies, the more we influence the performance of language learners. That is why the investigations about learning strategies play an important role for second language learning.

Learning strategies are considered by linguists to be a key component in second language acquisition and it has been studied a lot for the last years. For a better result in language learning, a second language learner should become aware of how people learn a language more efficiently.

The language learners' thoughts, feelings, and emotions are very important for the development of the target language. The people's character and learning style play an important role while they are learning a language. Furthermore, students develop their own language learning strategies after a few years of language learning experience. If the language teachers become aware of these strategies, they can guide the learners in a more effective way.

Socio-cultural background has an important effect on designing one's learning strategy. The strategy for learning new words, grammar, tenses, correct pronunciation, everyday language, communication techniques, and how to write essays and compositions are shaped by the social and cultural foundation of the learners. Some strategies are developed by the learners themselves, but some strategies are brought to the attention of language learners by their teachers.

The strategies used by a sociable student may differ from those of a shy student. In this respect, we are going to study the Turkish and Bosnian people's ways of learning English from the perspective of their cultural and social background.

Definition

It is important to understand the meaning of learning strategies and have an idea about main strategies used by the language learners. This will guide language teachers to discover the ways their students learn language and provide them with useful information for the future applications.

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The term language learning strategy has been defined in different ways over time. The following are some explanations by experts in this field:

The phrase 'learning strategies' refers to the actions and behaviors a person uses to learn (Oxford, 1989). All learners use strategies to help them succeed, but not all are aware of the strategies they use. As Oxford (1989) states: "...the most successful learners tend to use learning strategies that are appropriate to the material, to the task, and to their own goals, needs, and stage of learning," .

Wenden and Rubin (1987) define learning strategies as "... any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information."

Richards and Platt (1992) state that learning strategies are "intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information."

Faerch, Claus, and Kasper (1983) stress that a learning strategy is "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language."

According to Stern (1992), "the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques."

As it is understood, learning strategies are widely related with language learning. Oxford (1989) identifies six broad categories of strategies.

1. metacognitive (e.g. self-monitoring, paying attention)
2. affective (e.g. self-encouragement, anxiety reduction)
3. social (e.g. ask questions, become culturally aware)
4. memory (e.g. grouping, imagery, associating)
5. cognitive (e.g. reasoning, analyzing, summarizing)
6. compensation (e.g. guessing meanings, using synonyms)

Good Language Learning Strategies

The main concern of research on language learning strategies has been on "identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language." (Rubin and Wenden, 1987)

Lessard-Clouston (1997) states that helping students understand good language learning strategies and training them to develop and use such strategies are the appreciated characteristics of a good language teacher.

According to Naiman, Frohlich, and Todesco (1975), successful second language learners use the following six strategies:

1. select language situations that allow one's (learning) preferences to be used
2. actively involve themselves in language learning
3. see language as both a rule system and a communication tool
4. extend and revise one's understanding of the language
5. learn to think in the language
6. address the affective demands of language learning

Based on the extensive research on learning strategies (Chamot - O'Malley, 1994 and Rubin, 1975), successful second language learners use some common learning strategies effectively. Rubin (1975) describes the "good" language learners as in the following way:

1. They are willing guessers
2. They are accurate guessers
3. They have a strong drive to communicate

4. They look for patterns in the language
5. They try to classify language
6. They analyze language
7. They take advantage of all practice opportunities
8. They monitor their own speech
9. They pay attention to meaning

Productive Skills and an Alternative Writing Strategy for Turkish Language Learners

Lessard-Clouston (1997) states that language learning strategies contribute to the development of the communicative competence of the students. As Oxford (1990) mentions, language learning strategies "... are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed movement, which is essential for developing communicative competence.

When we compare Turkish and Bosnian students from the point of their socio-cultural backgrounds, Bosnian language learners are considered to be more communicative than Turkish ones. According to Christian Hirt and Renate Ortlieb, Bosnia and Herzegovinian people can be described as having openness for new things, loud and strong emotional reactions, sociable and hospitable personalities, favoritism for friends and acquaintances, and stereo talking .

In addition, Bosnian people have a culture of debate and they love having coffee and eating out together. When they meet strangers for the first time, they can start a conversation easily and find many topics for conversation. Because they live in the Balkan region and have contact with European countries, they show the characteristics of European people too. The children have more freedom at home and they can express themselves better in the society. These characteristics give them an opportunity for a relaxed language learning environment.

On the other hand, the Turkish socio-cultural context has been described as interpersonal relationships. As a result of a teacher-centered educational system, Turkish students speak less in the class, prohibiting them from improving their speaking skills while learning languages.

It is rare to find Turkish students for conversation and speaking activities. The teacher dominates the classroom and the students are mostly passive listeners. These characteristics have a negative effect on the Turkish students' language learning.

Because language learning strategies play an important role in English Language Teaching, it is very important to value the cultures of students and encourage them to support each other as they learn. In particular, exploring and enhancing writing strategies have a key role in language learning so that students may benefit from them.

A good example of one effective strategy used for writing is called 'Zadacnica'(writing task) in Bosnian education system. In this system, several topics are given to students based on their comprehension level and the curriculum. This is done at the beginning of each term so that the students may study and prepare for the writing task. They collect information and study words and phrases which will possibly be used for those topics. The students write sample essays, compare the ideas with colleagues, and ask their teacher for some prompts.

The language teachers then choose three previously given topics and ask the students to write an essay on one of them. During the exam, the students write an essay on the topic they have selected without using any sources. Instead, they rely on their memory to write a good essay without background information. The exam is given twice per term; they write four essays throughout the year.

The essays are reviewed by the teachers and the mistakes are just underlined. The essays are returned to the students and they correct their mistakes using the prompts the teachers noted on the papers.

This type of writing allows the Bosnian language learners an opportunity to develop good strategies in language learning. In Turkish students' language learning, the students spend less time with peer reviewing. This is because the Turkish students, as a result of cultural background, do not like others to control and evaluate their essays.

The essay checking strategy used in Bosnian language learning is used for improving writing skills.

The essay writing strategy contributes to overall language development by enhancing accuracy, word choice, grammar, etc. It is systematically integrated into the English curriculum to teach writing effectively and engagingly. The strategy gives the learners a chance to maximize the role of written form in English language learning. At the same time, the students gain better awareness of good writing skills and realize the value of writing in English learning. Gaining confidence in writing and language learning, from passive to active learning is another advantage of this strategy.

Conclusion

Raising learner awareness about the nature and communicative potentials should be the main purpose in language learning. For this reason the language learners should be provided with opportunities for practice and encouraged to take risks in language learning.

Productive skills are especially shaped by the socio-cultural background of the language learners. The strategies that influence the Turkish and Bosnian students' language learning environment differ in many ways resulting in variable levels of speaking and writing skills.

Writing and speaking strategies of Turkish students can be improved by studying the prompts for improving the level of language learners. For developing speaking and writing skills, it is essential to understand the socio-cultural influences on the learners. Teachers should develop and design suitable activities for the language learners in accordance with the procedures of language teaching. Extroverted personalities shine during communicative activities. Naturally, we do not want to stereotype the personalities of people from different countries, but environment and cultural factors have a big impact on people's characters.

On the other hand, a fresh perspective for the Turkish students may open new doors to improve their language learning. Writing strategies that work well for Bosnian students can be implemented for the Turkish students as well. The barriers and difficulties of language learning for Turkish students can be easily overcome with suitable strategies which are sensitively developed by teachers.

Writing is one of the skills in which Turkish students perform well, but they still need guidance during their language learning process.

The productive skills such as speaking and writing need to be activated with appropriate learning strategies so that the learners can confidently use the target language. Language teachers should also find different ways to develop personal ability with writing. In this way it will be used as a tool for students to express themselves and socialize.

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