

KEYNOTE ARTICLE 4

Effective Grammar Learning Strategies for Developing Intercultural Competence in Adult Learners of German and Spanish as L3 by Nikolina Božinović and Ana Havelka Meštović, *RIT Croatia*,

Abstract

The use of effective grammar learning strategies contributes to the development of grammatical competence, which represents one of the components of communicative language competence. Successful foreign language learners need to have intercultural communicative competence which requires an understanding of both the L1 and L2 cultures (Lim & Griffith, 2016). This study aims to explore grammar learning strategies used by German/Spanish language learners with Croatian first language (L1) and English second language (L2). Participants had Croatian as L1, English as L2, and were learning German and Spanish as L3. The use of grammar learning strategies was measured by the Grammar Learning Strategies Questionnaire (Božinović, 2012). The results have shown that there are statistically significant differences between German and Spanish in the frequency of the grammar learning strategy used. Strategies of active and visual grammar learning are more frequently used by Spanish learners than by German learners. German learners used fewer strategies due to lower motivation. Participants simultaneously use a number of different grammar learning strategies which they combine and adapt in new language circumstances in order to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultures.

Keywords: grammar learning strategies (GLS), intercultural competence, German and Spanish as L3.

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning is becoming more and more popular as the world is becoming increasingly globalised. The goal of acquiring a language, even a foreign one, is to engage in effective communication with others. Successful communication involves knowing when, where, to whom, and how to express oneself.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) refers to the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It goes beyond simply knowing the language of another culture. In the 1990s, Byram, along with several researchers, introduced the concept of ICC as a framework for understanding the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts. One of the key components of ICC includes language

proficiency. It involves the ability to communicate in multiple languages and to understand the nuances of language use in different cultural contexts. (Byram, 1997)

The connection between language learning strategies and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is significant, as both areas of development are closely intertwined in the process of acquiring effective communication skills in a multicultural context. When learning a foreign language learners use efficient problem-solving skills in intercultural contexts. Language learners often employ metacognitive strategies (Wenden, 1991; Cohen and Dörnyei, 2002), such as self-reflection and problem-solving, to navigate challenges in language acquisition. These skills can be transferred to intercultural contexts, where individuals may encounter communication barriers and need to adapt their strategies for effective interaction.

Language learning strategies serve as a foundation for the development of ICC by integrating language proficiency with cultural awareness, adaptability, and effective communication skills in diverse contexts. As individuals navigate the complexities of language acquisition, they inherently acquire skills and perspectives that enhance their ability to communicate successfully across cultures.

2. Background

2.1. Definitions and characteristics of grammar learning strategies

Grammar learning strategies (GLS), considered as a specialized subgroup of general learning strategies, play a significant role in the process of foreign language acquisition. The initial research of learning strategies began in the 1970s (Rubin, 1975; Savignon, 1972; Stern, 1975), and the systematic research addressing the use of language learning strategies took place in the 1980s and 1990s. These studies have shown that foreign language learners employ a diverse range of strategies that contribute to effective language learning (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). GLS has unquestionably become a new area of interest in the field of second language acquisition, given the pivotal role grammar plays in all language skills and in facilitating the functioning of language as a system. Despite its importance, the exploration of GLS, has not been conducted systematically thus far (Anderson, 2005; Ellis, 2006). In the past decade, however, there has been a more systematic examination of specific learning strategies,

including those related to grammar (Tilfarlioğlu & Yalçın, 2005; Kemp, 2007; Pawlak, 2009).

Oxford, Rang Lee, and Park (2007) define GLS as actions or behaviours which learners consciously use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable. Cohen and Pinilla-Herrera (2010), starting from the classic examples of GLS that rely primarily on conscious repetition of grammatical structures and imitation of language forms and memorisation, have defined GLS as intentional thoughts and actions that the student consciously chooses to facilitate learning and gain better control over the use of grammatical structures. These authors emphasised that GLS is used to enhance language expression and to assist in learning and using appropriate grammatical forms and structures. Therefore, the use of appropriate GLS contributes to more effective learning. There is no doubt that there are so-called "universal" GLS whose transfer from one language to another can be assumed and expected, as well as grammar-specific strategies that are specific to a particular foreign language, given the complexity and specificity of the grammar system of a particular foreign language. Tschirner (2001) emphasised that in order to develop grammatical competence, students need to develop effective GLS. Grammatical competence is not acquired exclusively by learning, applying and mechanically practising grammatical rules, that is, there is no direct path from meta-linguistic, grammatical rules to the construction of grammatical competence, but the emphasis is placed on the conscious use of specific GLS. Griffiths (2008) emphasised that learners who make visible progress in learning a foreign language are more likely to use GLS to improve their own grammatical knowledge. Griffiths (2008) summarised that the choice of strategies is influenced by a number of factors such as learner's proficiency level (Green & Oxford, 1995; Lan & Oxford, 2003), sex (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Ehrmann & Oxford, 1989), gender (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990; Kaylani, 1996; Liu, 2004), cultural background (Griffiths & Parr, 2000; Dickinson, 1996; Parry, 1993; Tyacke & Mendelsohn, 1986) learning style, previous experience in learning and motivation (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Braten & Olaussen, 1998; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2001; Chang, 2005; Dörnyei, 2006), as well as personal beliefs and assumptions about language learning. (Bialystok, 1978). Rampillon (1995) pointed out that one of the distinguishing features of GLS is that it can be changed, i.e. the existing strategies can be adapted and transferred, new ones learned and

acquired, and unsuccessful ones abandoned. Pavičić Takač (2008) also emphasised that the strategies are oriented towards the broad goal of development of communicative language competence, i.e. they involve interaction with other students. As one of the distinctive features of learning strategies, Pavičić Takač (2008) states that in addition to the cognitive aspect, strategies also involve the metacognitive, social and affective aspects. In addition, the flexible use of strategies contributes to learning, and to strategy transfer (cf. Wenden, 1987, 1991).

Finally, strategies as individual differences can be practised until their use becomes automatic, i.e. until learners become skilled and efficient in strategy use. It is the fact that strategies can be taught that makes them most intriguing for both teachers and researchers. In a Scottish educational setting, Kemp (2007) conducted a study revealing a correlation between GLS and grammatical competence among multilingual speakers. This approach unveiled additional grammatical strategies employed by respondents in learning foreign language grammar. Results demonstrated that respondents with greater competence in multiple languages exhibited a higher frequency of using GLS. Those with proficiency in more than one language tended to contribute their own strategies, thereby expanding the list of grammar strategies. Notably, the use of strategies, known as the threshold effect, was more pronounced during the acquisition of a third language and continued to increase with each subsequent foreign language learned.

Building on the limited existing studies of GLS, this research deals with GLS employed by students studying two different foreign languages within the Croatian educational context.

2.2. Intercultural Communicative Competence and Language Proficiency

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) represents a key factor in effective intercultural communication. ICC requires not only that learners know about the target language culture but about their own culture and its effects on behaviour, thoughts, perceptions, etc. True competence in intercultural communication requires that an individual has active knowledge of both his/her own culture as well as that of the target language culture. In developing this competence, one needs to activate metacognitive strategies or higher order critical thinking skills to understand the effects of culture on individuals and promote self-awareness. Oxford (1990) pointed out that

metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their own cognition, enabling them to focus, plan, and evaluate their progress as they move toward communicative competence. In that sense, learners who are capable of using metacognitive strategies become aware of their knowledge and skills and are thus able to control their learning process, which in turn leads them towards becoming autonomous learners. Metacognitive strategies are higher-order strategies with executive functions which comprise analysis, monitoring, evaluation, planning, and organising one's learning process. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) point out that learners who do not have a metacognitive approach or do not know how to apply it remain without a real goal and direction, without the ability to plan their learning, monitor their own progress in learning, and their achievements, and future goals of learning. Byram (1997) stressed that these components are not independent entities but represent various facets of a unified concept. The framework of the six competences serves as a useful starting point and can be summarized as follows:

- Linguistic competence refers to the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances which are formed in accordance with the rules of the specific language and bear their conventional meaning which native speakers would normally attach to an utterance when used in isolation.
- Sociolinguistic competence represents the awareness of ways in which the choice of language forms is determined by such conditions as setting, relationship between communication partners, communicative intention.
- Discourse competence refers to the ability to use appropriate strategies in the construction and interpretation of texts.
- Strategic competence refers to the ability to navigate challenging communication situations by employing methods to effectively convey our intended meaning or to comprehend someone else's message.
- Socio-cultural competence involves recognising that every language is situated in a sociocultural context and utilises a specific reference framework that may differ somewhat from that of the foreign language learner.
- Social competence involves both the desire and the skill to interact with others, involving motivation, attitude, self-confidence, empathy, and the ability to handle social situations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Aim

This study aims to analyse the role of GLS in the process of acquiring a third language (L3). The focus of this research is GLS in German and Spanish as L3 acquisition by learners with Croatian as their first language (L1) and English as their second language (L2). We assume that adult language learners use a different GLS when learning different foreign languages, which they partly transfer from their mother tongue or another foreign language they have previously learned. In alignment with the established classification of GLS by Božinović (2012), our research aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) Which groups of GLS are most frequently used?
- (2) Are there are differences in the use of specific groups of GLS in relation to two different foreign languages being learned?

3.2. Participants

There was a total of 150 students learning German and Spanish as L3 who participated in this study. 75 students were learning German as L3 and 75 students were learning Spanish as L3, all of whom were aged between 19 and 25. All participants were native speakers of Croatian, had learned English as L2, and were learning German or Spanish as L3 at the time of the study. All students were enrolled on the Intermediate German/Spanish course at the Rochester Institute of Technology's subsidiary in Croatia (RIT Croatia). They had the same number of hours of instruction (a total of 120 hours). They all stated that they had never been to a German/Spanish speaking country and that their first contact with the German/Spanish language had been when they enrolled on the Beginners' German/Spanish course. Students at RIT Croatia are highly proficient in English. They started learning English in their early childhood and their classes at RIT Croatia are all taught in English and all of them spent at least one semester in the USA.

3.3. Instrument

Data on GLS were collected through a structured questionnaire to measure the type and frequency of GLS used (Božinović, 2012). The first part of the questionnaire is used to elicit demographic information about the participants and about the language repertoire of the participants. The second part of the questionnaire is an instrument designed to measure GLS (Questionnaire on grammar learning strategies). The questionnaire contains 48 statements that correspond to the individual grammar learning strategies classified in the categories above. The frequency of using GLS is measured by a rating scale of 1 to 5 (1 - I never do it, 2 - I mostly don't, 3 - I sometimes do it, 4 - I often do it, 5 - I always or almost always do it).

3.4. Data analysis

The data were collected during regular foreign language classes at RIT Croatia. Respondents were not previously informed that the survey would be carried out. The questionnaire was administered anonymously to keep the respondents as honest as possible in answering the questions. Data analysis was performed using descriptive and inferential statistics. In analysing the data, in addition to descriptive statistics, we also used inferential statistical procedures. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using the statistical program SPSS 17.0. (SPSS Inc. Released 2008. SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 17.0. Chicago: SPSS Inc.)

4. Results and Discussion

The results show that there is a statistically significant difference in the use of individual groups of GLS. Table 1 shows that the most frequently used strategies are grammar self-discovery strategies (3.54), followed by grammar memorisation strategies (3.29) and active GLS (3.36). The least frequently used strategies are visual GLS (2.73) and social GLS (2.94). Examining the values of average arithmetic means, it is evident that there is a certain asymmetry of most average arithmetic means favouring higher values. This observation suggests that respondents might employ a greater variety of GLS simultaneously.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for individual dimensions of GLS ($p < ,01$)

Grammar learning strategies	M	SD
Strategies of grammar self-discovery	3,54	,785
Grammar memorisation strategies	3,29	,712
Active grammar learning strategies	3,36	,675
Social grammar learning strategies	2,94	,709
Visual grammar learning strategies	2,73	,854

NOTE: M = arithmetic mean; **SD**= standard deviation;

As indicated in Table 2, the results of univariate analysis of variance for individual dimensions of GLS indicate that there are statistically significant differences between respondents of different foreign languages in the dimension of active GLS and visual GLS. Spanish language learners ($M = 0.335$) differ significantly from German language learners ($M = -0.194$) in the use of active GLS, in the direction of higher scores for Spanish learners. It is also evident that Spanish language learners ($M = 0.214$) were statistically significantly different from German language learners ($M = -0.124$) in the use of visual GLS, in the direction of higher scores for Spanish learners. The results indicate that Spanish learners are more likely to use certain types of GLS, namely, active GLS and visual GLS, as opposed to German language learners. These results suggest that the self-motivational strategies (cf. Cohen and Dörnyei, 2002), which serve as an additional driving force for foreign language grammar learning, are the most developed or most frequently used among respondents, along with the group of grammar memory strategies. According to our expectations, respondents predominantly employ a combination of self-motivational and grammar memorisation strategies, indicating intrinsic motivation and a concerted effort to master the grammatical structures of a foreign language. Given that the respondents are adult learners of a foreign language, it can be assumed that they want to enhance their grammatical competence to achieve greater success in future business environments, emphasising the need for developing intercultural ICC.

Table 2. Results of discrimination analysis of individual dimensions of GLS questionnaire according to German/Spanish as L3

VARIABLE	Wilks'	Correlation with discrimination factor	F-test (1,399)	P	M German	German	M Spanish	Spanish
Active grammar learning strategies	0,935	0,802	27,864	< 0,01	-0,194	0,966	0,335	0,972
Grammar memorisation strategies	0,997	0,178	1,368	> 0,200	-0,044	1,087	0,076	0,826
Social grammar learning strategies	0,998	0,142	0,870	> 0,200	-0,035	0,945	0,061	1,090
Visual grammar learning strategies	0,973	0,502	10,896	< 0,01	-0,124	0,921	0,214	1,095
Strategies of grammar self-discovery	1,000	-0,061	0,161	> 0,200	0,015	1,030	-0,026	0,950

NOTE: : M = arithmetic mean; \square = standard deviation; p = probability of statistical significance

Through statistical analysis of the research findings, we obtained data that give us the answer to the basic questions of the research. Specifically, it reveals variations in the use of GLS between learners of two different foreign languages. Notably, individuals learning Spanish are more inclined to employ active and visual GLS compared to those learning German. However, it is evident that respondents simultaneously use a diverse range of GLS, combining and adjusting them in their language acquisition process.

The results of this study indicate that there are differences in the use of GLS in adult learners of German and Spanish as L3. Contrary to our expectations, statistically significant differences were found between German and Spanish students in the use of active GLS and visual GLS. Spanish learners are more likely to use active and visual GLS, as opposed to German language learners. One plausible explanation

is that, in recent years, respondents in the Croatian educational context have been more frequently exposed to the influence of the Spanish language, which is growing in global popularity. Consequently, the rapid increase in the intensity of learning Spanish may contribute to a more frequent use of active GLS, which is probably related to the inherent self-motivational nature of these strategies, since they belong to the group of self-motivational strategies.

As this study deals with two different foreign languages, belonging to the group of Germanic and Romance languages, the use of GLS differs with respect to the foreign language being learned. Potential explanations for these differences can be found in the unique characteristics of the teaching and extracurricular learning contexts for German and Spanish in Croatia, as well as potential fluctuations in motivation observed among German language learners. Some studies, such as Bagarić (2007), have suggested that the motivation to learn German tends to diminish over the years, taking on instrumental or extrinsic characteristics, leading to a decline in linguistic confidence (Mihaljević Djigunović and Bagarić, 2007). Interpretation of the findings obtained in this research shows that students may have already developed certain language learning strategies which they simultaneously use, combine and adapt in new language circumstances in order to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultures. In order to develop intercultural language competence it is beneficial to develop efficient multilingual learning strategies. Multilingual learning strategies and intercultural language competence share a strong connection as they both involve the acquisition and use of multiple languages within diverse cultural contexts. Multilingual learning strategies focus on developing proficiency in multiple languages through various learning methods and techniques. They also promote cognitive flexibility by encouraging individuals to switch between languages. Jessner (2008) pointed out that metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness play a significant role in developing learning strategies in multilingual speakers. Multilingual speakers use different strategies from monolingual speakers (McLaughlin, 1990; Jessner, 2008) and they use GLS with different frequency (Dolgunsös, 2013).

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to provide insight into which Grammar Learning Strategies are most commonly used by the participants and to identify differences in the use of GLS in relation to the foreign language being learned. The research findings reveal statistically significant differences in the frequency of certain strategies: self-discovery grammar strategies, grammar memorisation strategies, and active grammar learning strategies are most commonly employed, whereas visual GLS and social GLS are less frequent.

GLS is specific to general foreign language learning strategies as well as to the particular foreign language being studied. Furthermore, proficiency level is also a strong determining factor in GLS usage with multilingual learners. It would be useful to explore further some other aspects of GLS and to gain better insight into specific GLS used by students in two different languages - German and Spanish as L3, or to determine how the proficiency level affects the use of GLS. These are just some of the aspects that future research could address. Finally, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of conducting systematic research in the field of GLS and ICC, since such research leads to a deeper understanding of the foreign language acquisition process.

6. References

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