

*Foreign Language Competence as an Integral Component of a University Graduate Profile II. CD* – University of Defence in Brno, The Czech Republic, 2009 – ISBN 978-80-7231-664-9

## THE TESTED WAYS OF LEARNING IN COMPETENCE ACHIEVEMENT

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**Abstract:** *Finding the interrelatedness of memory and context as the basic condition in competence achievement, the factors of context, memory and individual commitment in foreign language learning are considered. It is claimed that there are the tested ways of learning which can develop the required memory potential for the learner of a foreign language, and those related to reading, listening comprehension, speaking and writing are described. Involvement with language is singled out as an individual engagement, which facilitates competence. With classroom experience outweighing the statistical data, the described ways of learning can prove conducive to competence achievement in a foreign language.*

**Key words:** context and meaning, memory, reading inset with analysis, transcripts, modeling, the picking of words, culture-bound concepts.

### INTRODUCTION

When one identifies foreign language competence with proficiency rooted in the learner's intellectual alertness and memory potential bound to the running text (Drazdauskiene, 2007), one claims the essential interrelatedness of memory and context. The role of context in understanding has been elaborated in functional linguistics while reminding that knowledge is transmitted in social contexts, in which learning is an intrinsic part. Context and text being inherently rather than verbally interrelated, "contexts precede texts" (Halliday and Hasan, 1990, 5). This precedence is active physically and historically through the input role of the context and through the role of contextual factors in the interpretation of meaning, which, in British linguistics, has been defined as function in a context (Halliday and Hasan, p.8). Success in human communication gave Michael A. Halliday an idea that predictions "below the level of awareness" help people know what is going to be said next, "and that's how we understand what he or she does say" (Ibidem, p. 9). It is context, whether the context of culture, the context of situation or the co-text, that facilitates these predictions. While combining distinct differential features, the context, which is marked by field, tenor and mode of discourse, and the text, which draws on experiential, interpersonal, logical and textual meaning, are interdependent. "Meaning' arises from the friction between the two"(Ibidem, p.p. 12, 23, 47). This intertextuality is continuous, and its core element is the previously known, which matters in learning and in general communication. As language is a carrier and a continuum of meaning, the previously known attaches itself to the immediate message and

complicates it. Although meaning in the immediate linguistic context (co-text) may be complex because of the intricate relations with the known, context (the context of situation and the context of culture) facilitates understanding by clarifying relations with the known. The inherited meaning in language is markedly obscured and can obscure the message but context lends its potential in clarifying the meaning. This is of service to the competent user of a foreign language through his conscious and unconscious awareness of meaning and context.

A reliable and powerful memory is the other essential component in foreign language competence. But it cannot be a memory with an overload of tension. This would mean too much strain and would consequently reduce the learner's proficiency. Man's memory cannot replace a dictionary, for example, or it would lose its human potential. Although very useful, the dictionary is a "collection of isolated facts" (Henry Sweet), and man's memory is little equipped to record disconnected data. Nevertheless memory serves efficiently a competent user of a foreign language. A word, a phrase or a quotation remembered is usually remembered in the contexts of their occurrence. And conversely, longer quotations, which function like contexts, may help remember a word required. This is a sufficient ground to assume that a competent learner's memory functions by the principle of reference. What is instinctive to the native speaker, comes to be replaced by instantaneous reference for the competent foreigner. Although one may agree that the meaning of the word to the foreigner is never the same that it is to the native speaker (William Entwistle), a foreign word supplied with contextual reference through its known uses is as good as a genuine word to a rationally disposed native speaker. Mental contextual reference is an adequate resource as it comes in quotations, as a rule, thus provides a context, accurate details to the meaning of the word, its category of formality and even its emotive colouring.

One can argue that memory is not the sole factor in foreign language competence and that various impressions of one's exposure to the foreign language matter. This is true but the result of one's exposure to the foreign language is, in fact, only a preliminary step in building one's memory potential. The memory potential that is satisfactory in foreign language competence is likely to grow not without some input of behavioural character. The process in which foreign language matter accumulates in the learner's brain is continuous. One's physical exposure to the foreign language and the culture is important but this needs not be the initial condition. It works well when it comes at an intermediate or an advanced stage of learning (cf.: Bacon, 1977, 21-23; Sweet, 1926, 76-78). Physical exposure to the foreign language strengthens the network of links in one's mental lexicon but, unlike active engagement with the foreign language, belongs to the stage of input. All forms of exposure to the foreign language are useful in competence achievement but they belong to the factors building one's memory potential. Competence is kept up by the active use of a foreign language, in which memory is essential. The work of the memory of a competent user of a foreign language is a productive process of an efficient instrument in its own right.

A variety of the modes of exposure to the foreign language are useful but the tongue and the mind are individual and so is the individual's memory. Therefore the learner's commitment and dedication are the basic conditions in competence achievement. Teachers notice the student's own effort, literary classics have noted it and the focus at recent European conferences has been on it. The theme of the IATEFL-CATE International Conference in Athens in 1981 was "Learner-based Classroom Teaching". The 41<sup>st</sup> IATEFL Annual Conference in Aberdeen in 2007 introduced the concept of enquiry-based learning (EBL), which was defined as "an environment in which learning is driven by a process of enquiry

owned by the student.” The task set by the tutor “facilitates the process, but the students pursue their own lines of enquiry, draw on their existing knowledge and identify the consequent learning needs. They seek out relevant evidence and take responsibility for analyzing and presenting this appropriately, either as part of a group or as an individual supported by others. They are thus engaged as partners in learning” (CEEFL 2005) // (Motteram and Edge, 2007). The 43<sup>rd</sup> IATEFL Annual Conference in Cardiff in 2009 has introduced the concept of ‘learner autonomy’, which is expected to heighten motivation. Although it is easy to misinterpret these concepts, the idea behind them is not the learner’s unrestricted freedom; it is rather the individual learner’s responsibility and commitment.

Individual efforts matter both in personal discipline and in decision making when one is learning a foreign language with the view of competence achievement. Even in studies of teacher training focused on “teaching as a professional activity”, it has been admitted that “language teaching professionals can, and even must, take on the responsibility for (their) own development”. ‘Development’ here means any learning activity that “can be done only by and for *oneself*” (Wallace, 2001, 2-3). This author remarks that “training or education is something that can be presented or managed by *others*” (Ibid, p.3). In language learning, individual efforts and choices are likewise essential. The individual student’s preferences matter in all the ways of learning proposed below.

## **1. THE TESTED WAYS OF LEARNING**

Given the learner’s dedication, foreign language competence can be advanced by the ways of learning that are conducive to the potential of the contextually embedded memory and one’s intellectual readiness as by those that relieve elementary difficulties. Focusing on the four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), one can selectively propose the tested modes of practice to involve every skill and to contribute to the development of foreign language competence. The dearth of research in teaching practice is known to have given impetus to respective studies (Brandt, 2006, 3). The dearth of descriptions of the treatment of linguistic material (cf.: Wallace, 2001, 14; Brandt, 2006, 2) in language learning and teaching (cf., though, Hill & Dobbyn, 1979, 64-86) makes one conscious of the need of a focused and lucid description of the select ways of learning. I have had considerable experience with all the modes of practice I intend to introduce here with fair results. All the modes of practice described below permit the individual learner’s choices and preferences.

### **1.1. Reading**

There are reasons to begin with some practice in reading. Although Paul Seligson questioned, at the IATEFL Cardiff Conference why we, teachers, should “spend most of our time teaching our students reading and writing” when “people in everyday life spend much more time listening and speaking”, Wendy Arnold challenged the teachers at the Milan Conference on “Innovations in teaching Children and Teenagers” in 2009 with the claim that the focus on reading and writing is strong because “they are the easiest to test”. The beginning with the easiest in some sense, though, cannot be a bad motive. One kind of reading might be productive in competence achievement as pleasant and simple enough. This is what might be called **reading inset with analysis**. Reading is best when it is comfortable (cf.: Bassett, 2008). Reading inset with analysis has been designed for a literate reader. It means reading an individually chosen or a prescribed book of fiction, with which one feels comfortable, at the pace of about 50-70 pages a week and stopping once within this time to focus on a page of the

text that has appealed to the reader (or to the teacher). The task that this pause envisages is a close study of the text focusing on its language first. This means learning the meaning of the unknown words and looking up the meaning even of the familiar but intriguing words in *The Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* or in *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and in one of Webster's Dictionaries. These Dictionaries are to be used to access the most exhaustive definitions of troublesome or interesting words and to try to memorise incidental items within the dictionary entries that appeal or attract attention and are related to the word in point. These may be some of the quoted illustrative examples, incidental idioms or an occasional synonym. It is very good if the student can remember the stylistic value of the word in focus. (Cf. this task with reference to pp. 123-124 from *Agnes Grey* by Anne Bronte). The work with the Dictionary may be supplemented by learning the words and phrases on the page that might be useful in routine usage. As this work is being done in the context of a page of fiction, the chosen words are not difficult to memorise and the routinely useful items are likely to remain in a long-term memory because they also come in the context. The vocabulary study should be limited to Standard English usage only. If substandard English occurs on the page, it should be in the focus merely for understanding but not for usage. The student can also try to memorise useful structural patterns, whole sentences or random quotations, if they appeal to him. Such longer items, if memorised, build the running text as the potential of the memory of a competent user of a foreign language.

The study of the language of a page of the text of extensive reading may be accompanied by questions of literary character. The student may be asked to sum up a character and its development on the page and in the context of a whole book, he may consider an aspect of the development of the conflict related to the page of reading or appreciate a description on the page or allusions, if they occur. Questions of the meaning of the events and people depicted and the sense the passage for the reader are always intriguing. When the page of fiction is important in or representative of the work, the student may be encouraged to write an appreciation of about a page of a character, a theme or conflict development or of his own relation to the events. This is not an easy task but when it is very short, this practice helps the student exercise the use of English. Besides, questions of literary character always challenge the student intellectually because he has to combine some three levels of thinking when giving answers to such questions. Questions of literary character happen to extend over the page on to the known part of the book. Moreover, the teacher can and often does comment on the language of the page cross textually as this leads to questions of culture. If the teacher prescribes words and phrases to be learnt, it is very desirable that the teacher himself should use the phrases when discussing questions that appeal to the student. The student's engagement with a page of fiction can be exploited to train all his skills in the foreign language because fiction makes it a pleasant and context-bound engagement, which is intellectually challenging and rewarding. After this analytical exercise the student should resume his extensive reading of the book.

I have practiced reading inset with analysis of this kind with university students of three levels. The result was positive and the practice appealed both to the students and to the teachers who observed it. This was guided reading inset with analysis. Reading inset with analysis may be practiced individually, although the teacher's occasional assistance is very welcome. I have also had some practice in using reading inset with analysis in learning individually a second foreign language. The progress in the foreign language was marked partly because weekly consultations with a private teacher supported it. This would be a summary picture of reading inset with analysis.

## 1.2. Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension has been a notoriously neglected skill. When complaints of the bookish language taught to the students have come from Mario Rinvoluceri at the IATEFL Cardiff Conference, it seemed that listening comprehension was called in the first instance to take the burden of improvement over. Indeed, when understanding becomes a problem, the ear of the student rather than the register of the language should aid him: the student should be trained to understand a great variety of accents and styles, while he himself should learn to use Standard English. The development of listening comprehension is best when it is topically relevant to other resources in language practice classes. University undergraduates in my practice did well when listening in with a task to transcribe a part of the text while using *Interviews in Conversation* with British authors, Graham Greene, Margaret Drabble and others, *Tapes for Readers* with American authors, Alex Hailey, Tennessee Williams, and others, and recorded seminars on Shakespeare's select plays, S.T. Coleridge, and others. This was both an interesting and an adequate task. They found directly recorded lectures on classical English poetry (John Keats, Samuel T. Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Alfred Lord Tennyson and a few other poets) given by a distinguished person holding an Oxford University degree in Literature more difficult to follow and transcribe. But listening comprehension advances in continual practice, while ear training can be gradual (cf.: Hill & Dobbyn, 1979, 32-36).

There are only two warnings to be taken into consideration: the progress can be satisfactory when students are aided with at least fragments of transcripts to help them at the start or in a difficulty. Some difficulties in listening comprehension, though, should better be skipped. For example, if there appears a phrase or a word which the student fails to understand, he should be advised not to remain fixed on the word while listening repeatedly to the fragment. This does not help. He should rather skip the place and cover it in a longer passage after some time. If he still fails to understand by ear, only a script can help. I have known passages used in a second and third stage of learning while mastering a second foreign language when even an experienced teacher could not decipher a recorded natural conversation. No time should obviously be wasted on such listening practice as this teaches nothing, while the scripted text resolves the problem in no time. But committing to memory of occasional fragments of the conversations one transcribes is a rewarding practice: the student's memory extends to the spoken idiom, and this is useful not only in speaking but also in reading and understanding.

The problem today when the challenge is to understand by ear a great variety of accents, most of them substandard, is likely to be the relevant material. It is film and television that might be the readiest sources of substandard language for listening comprehension, but the student should better not be thrown into it, sink or swim. It is very good to introduce the student into a film previously seen by the teacher, to quote some of the initial text or use a script, if available. In other words, the difficulties at the start in listening comprehension should not be exaggerated. They should rather be overcome by the mutual effort of the teacher and the student **if learning rather than dull rules matters.**

## 1.3. Speaking

Oral skills should preferably be practised in conversation because there is always a difference between the language learnt and the language acquired. Acquisition here means conversation skills rather than first language acquisition. But there is also a trap if one is too bold. One's mind can be easily misdirected even in conversation with native speakers and the utterances

memorised incidental or misheard. There is no certainty of a steady development of one's conversation skills if one does not pursue a systematic study of a foreign language (cf.: Sweet, 1926, 76-79). Even when one can practice conversation in the country of the foreign language, one has to be selective of the company one keeps and mind what the grammar of the language prescribes. Speaking a foreign language means continuous balancing between linguistic knowledge and a spontaneous utterance, between culture and an incident in learning to speak it all along. The known advice from the classics (Sweet, 1926, 78) is therefore invaluable. Therefore some consistent study of a foreign language at a local university done through literature is not a loss. A contact with the native environment may be shorter then, especially when select, less expensive and no less productive. I have had experience in a systematic study of English as a foreign language at a local university myself and with my students and it was really profitable. The language practice classes involved such exercises as writing compositions with prescribed vocabulary and delivering them orally in class, writing summary analysis of short excerpts of fiction and briefing the class on the current events in a prepared talk of 3-5 minutes. This practice was based on writing first and speaking next, but it developed a sense of logic in English and that of the discipline of its grammar. In conversation, then, the students used to be disciplined and attentive and well applied the important rule of conversation related to the ability "not only to speak but also to listen politely". The transition from the passive literary English of the student to fluent conversation in Standard English took less than a couple of months. Students of EFL today, who learn spoken English with CALL, are fluent from the beginning, but they are inaccurate, speak a stylistic mixture of English, and some of them are bold to embarrassment or rudeness.

#### **1.4. Writing**

Writing has taken routine practice for quite a few people in competence achievement in EFL. Simple copying, if it is self imposed, makes sense and is not drudgery, is useful in the long run (cf.: Hill & Dobbyn, 1979, 79-86). A more intellectually rewarding practice is a close study of chosen works, such as the classical English essay, and modeling on this example. The classical English essay is a compact form with an obvious logical pattern which has withstood centuries: a thesis, an antithesis, some deliberation and a witty conclusion. This is easy to grasp and not very difficult to apply at an advanced stage of knowledge in EFL. The choice of the topic matters a lot in writing according to the model of the classical English essay. An advanced student of English as foreign language can do some thinking before writing and solve the problem, especially that thinking matters in competence achievement in EFL in general. If a student masters the form of the English essay in writing, other styles of writing in English as a foreign language are likely to be a minor problem. It is the period of the initial close study that may be difficult.

## **2. INVOLVEMENT WITH THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Individual ways of engagement with the target language are required to broaden one's knowledge and strengthen one's linguistic instinct. This can be done in different ways. The practice, which might be called, **the picking of words**, is related both to listening, and reading, on the one hand, and to using a foreign language, on the other, is individual and conducive to competence achievement. It has to have a problem to solve for a start. My problem was culture-bound concepts in the initial conversations with native speakers and a few concepts in reverse translation, i.e. in translation from Lithuanian into English. The first was the English for Christmas Eve, which is a very special occasion to the Lithuanians and

has a name to which there is no equivalent in English. Since there is no word equivalent to name the event, I have come with the following descriptions after a period of thinking and research: *the Family meal on Christmas Eve* or *Christmas Vigil*, which native speakers found comprehensible. In solving my initial problems in reverse translation, I also discovered that 'ideology' in imaginative literature is *party spirit* (*The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary*), that a thing one produces when in urgent need is *makeshift* (*a makeshift conference hall* - BBC WS, 6.05.07), that paper reused for printing is *recycled paper*, a spot of land protected for plants and animals is *a nature reserve* (*The Countryman*, Autumn 1974), that a representative priest in olden times is *a high priest/priestess* (William Faulkner; Robert Graves), etc. The collocations of this kind sharpen one's conscious and semiconscious insight into the analytic clarity of the English word combination. When there appears a nest of concepts, an individual world of concepts of the student, which is a context in several senses, begins developing. As the few references above indicate, one draws upon any source. In my case, the richest source was the BBC World Service radio. While listening in, I would pinpoint an interesting word or phrase and instantaneously jot it down on a slip of paper giving the equivalent in my native language and the genuine English word or phrase in a quotation. The same practice applied to any reading or even to listing a dictionary. One needs not search when one is trying to look up a particular word. Some words simply catch the eye in the process, and I would not close the dictionary on them. I would rather jot down the incidental finding. In this process, I have discovered *a pole vault*, *the print-run of a book*, *council estates*, etc., while the BBC World Service and reading added *the interim government*, *a caretaker government*, *coalition governments*, etc.; *an orbital motorway*, *a one-way street*, *multi-lane traffic*, *a divided highway*, etc. When topical contexts develop in one's word box, the contextual organisation of the material becomes more fundamental. Systemic relations also begin developing in this individually compiled vocabulary, which is to support one's memory. I had noticed, for instance, that frequent evaluative English words with emotive colouring (*wonderful*, *marvellous*, *enchanting*, *remarkable* etc) may cause problems to the foreign speaker. It appears that positive evaluative words are used accurately in their denotative sense and some happen to have a place even in scholarly studies. Their referential meaning is vaguer in conversation but collocation matters. This, though, is an extra question unforeseen for the present paper.

The idea of systemic relations in an individually compiled vocabulary devised on the run leads one to a generalization of how one copes with culture-bound concepts. When there is no equivalent in English for a culture-bound word in another language, (and there are words denoting virtually anything in English), one has to turn to description. The practice of the picking of words has also given me an idea what referential descriptions are acceptable in English. Cf.: *an electrical extension cord*, *old country pursuits*, *a tear-off calendar*, *stumps of burned-out candles*, *a harvest festival*, *the slipping standards*, etc. Minding the structural regularities in the English collocation, one can deduce that culture-bound concepts, for which there is no single word equivalent in English, should be described by combining the simplest concrete words in analytically explicit relations. The best word combination, thus, is a combination of two words with or without the article or a combination of three words, in which the words retain analytically explicit relations of two pairs with one shared member (cf.: *intellectual rigour*, *a shopping trolley*, *ludicrously puritanical*, *wondrously useless*; *the internal combustion engine* = internal combustion + combustion engine; *remotely operated vehicles* = remotely operated + operated vehicles, etc.).

The individually devised verbal world once started continues limitless. The news or reading can yield something new every day, the utterances which highlight the English sensitivity for

a concrete verb leading. The involvement with current English speech divides one's focus among a variety of expressions to support modeling on examples. This turn of thought encourages stereotyping in English as a foreign language but stereotyping in speech, when reference sources are reliable, is not the worst of issues.

My statistical evidence of the picking of words is inconspicuous. I have found it reliable and rewarding for over three decades. Because of the limited individual initiative in competence achievement in a rigorous educational system, I have had only two girl students who adopted my practice of the picking of words and found it productive. But up to a dozen of my colleagues followed a similar practice with satisfactory results.

## CONCLUSION

I have had considerable experience and success with the tested ways of practice described above in competence achievement, with varied statistical evidence. But competence is an individual achievement, and so the numbers cannot really be a resort when one seeks positive evidence. Even having incidental inaccuracies in individual cases, the ways of practice described above can nevertheless develop the student's insight into the choice of the word and the phrase structure in English, his intellectual and verbal reaction and memory potential. These ways of learning are likely to contribute to his competence in this language because they develop the interactive power of memory and context. They also reflect some aspects of the natural use and acquisition of language. I have tested the use of these ways of study to an extent in learning two other European languages. In so far as methods can be shared, these ways of learning may have a wider application.

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