Teaching the Systematic Dictionary Use as a Strategy for Accuracy and Confidence Building

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This is a longitudinal study, which started in 2004 and ended in 2005. There participated sixteen high-school pupils-same number of boys and girls, aged 13-15, of similar socioeconomic background, whose MT is Turkish but living in Thrace, Greece and attending Greek State Schools rather than minority Public Schools. The fact is that we expected to have more subjects but, unfortunately, we had to exclude a lot of pupils due to a number of reasons such as differences in the socioeconomic level of the families, gender availability-having more male than female pupils, negative attitude towards the research, etc. What we are investigating is whether and to what extent the systematic use of both monolingual English dictionaries and bilingual Greek-English and English-Greek dictionaries could possibly result in a better reading comprehension and, in the long run, in an improvement and enrichment of their English vocabulary and, to a lesser extent, in Greek. Our aim is to reinforce their general linguistic competence and performance but also their strategic competence by encouraging them to use dictionaries when working at home, too. Furthermore, we are measuring their confidence levels before and after using dictionaries, at certain intervals over the whole period of the experiment. All the participants were given individualised instruction on dictionary use in pair and group work at certain intervals over the whole period of the experiment, too. It is important to notice that we are not really evaluating certain *dictionaries, it is rather unrealistic as their resources are rather poor; nevertheless, we are trying to exploit what we really have at our disposal, that specific time. The results justified our expectations as most the students that collaborated seem to be very comfortable with dictionary use and confident with the information they expect to find there.*

Introduction

In Thrace, Greece, there are some compact Muslim populations, who speak Turkish and/or Pomak, an oral hybrid of Slavic and Turkish, and, occasionally, Greek. In the case of mountain people, they have a clear preference to Turkish, the high variety, while urban populations speak Greek sufficiently well. It is true that in recent years there has been an increasing interest in Teaching Greek as a Second/Foreign Language (GRESEFL) among those populations. Even more so, a lot of *frondistiria,* type of evening schools, have come to provide to those Muslim-pupils evening private tuition in every subject taught in the public school including Greek and English language at a fee not at all negligible. The reason the children are now seeking extra help in order to improve their general performance in the Greek school, something they did not ten years ago, is that they seem to have realised, both themselves and their parents, that in this way they will have more chances to succeed in the Higher Education National Exams and gain a place in a prestigious department, such as Medicine, Engineering, Economics and Law. Such a success will mean a lot to them and their families as it will give them a high social and economic status and prevent then from being socially secluded.

More specifically, the majority of the Muslims in Thrace may have grown up in an environment where the official language is Greek, however they speak either Turkish and/or Pomak, i.e. they are bilingual in these two languages but they do not speak a word of Greek, the official language of the country they live in. They usually come in contact with Greek for the first time, when they go to the high school at the age of twelve. Nevertheless, even now, they have two options, either to attend the Greek State School where the instruction is mainly in Greek and certain subjects in Turkish, or the Public Minority School where the official language is Turkish with very little time

spent on Greek. Children who opt to attend the Greek High School will have to do most of their subjects in Greek, their teachers and peers are Greeks, the instruction is in Greek but, sometimes, they cannot even construct a simple sentence in Greek! To make things worse, they also have to attend English and, sometimes, French or German as a compulsory subject in the curriculum, together with the classical Arabic for the Koran and the Ancient Greek and Latin.

The problem seems to be worse for the pupils who come from the rural areas or from the mountains, as their parents usually do not speak Greek and they avoid to watch Greek television or radio, they usually prefer Turkish instead; this is even more so as Turkish is considered to be the high variety language among Muslim populations of Thrace. Furthermore, they insist that their children should do the same because they feel that if they do not act accordingly, they take the risk to lose their identity. In recent years a lot of effort has been made within the EC programmes to convince these people that they will not lose their identity if they abandon their self-seclusion and educate themselves and their children, yet there is still a long way to go.

The situation seems to be better in the urban areas, where Muslim minority are in business, usually shopkeepers, restaurant or/and café owners. Consequently they socialise with Christian customers and they normally speak Greek sufficiently. Their life style is close to that of Christians and the girls are dressed more or less like their Christian peers. They quite often send their children to the Greek school and to *frondistiria* for both Greek and English. Some of the parents choose to send their children to *frondistiria* run by minority teachers and offer help in every lesson including Greek and English only to minority children. Others go for mixed ones, for both Greek and minority children. However, things are not quite straight-forward for these children either, because they still have a deficiency as far as language is concerned and this deficiency affects their behaviour. They are usually underconfident, reserved and even when they come to the university with some kind of special exams (a small percentage of minority children enter prestigious departments with very low marks), they are still encountered with difficulties and they cannot cope with the difficulties of their studies. Such a perspective is not at all encouraging because it means that they will never be able to graduate and make their dream come true.

After 30 years in the area and in education, I have very serious reasons to believe that the main reason of their poor performance is clearly their linguistic (in)competence. And how could it be different if we are dealing with children exposed to six or more languages? Consequently, we think that are the ideal subjects for a lot types of study, including a dictionary use one.

Tackling vocabulary problems in reading comprehension

Strategic competence

Within the frame of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980), Faerch et al. (1984) define the linguistic competence and the strategic competence.

The strategic competence is normally related to the communication strategies, which are activated when the FL speakers want to bridge a gap in communication with their limited resources, that is to say to cover their inability to make use of parts of linguistic or pragmatic knowledge. Nevertheless, Faerch and Kasper (1986) include also learning strategies in their model of strategic competence, as strategic competence should not only be communication related but also learning related. Furthermore, while reading people have to employ what are often referred to as processing strategies in reading (Clark and Clark 1977), in order to understand a message in the text. These strategies have something in common with communication and learning strategies but they are also different from them in some ways. Therefore, in our model of strategic competence we will include all communication, learning and general processing strategies in reading.

Another issue that should be clarified here is that, unlike Bialystok (1983) and Tarone (1981), we use the term communication strategies for both production and reception complying with Widdowson (1983) who considers capacity at word level the meaning potential of words and to cover, amongst others, inferencing, negotiating the meaning and problem solving.

Therefore, we perceive as a person's strategic competence all communication, learning and general processing strategies in reading as they all share a lot of methods and types of action so as to achieve communication successfully, such as using cues from the surrounding context for inferencing or using a dictionary (Bauer 1981, Scholfield 1982, Macfarqular et al. 1983, Nation 1988, Kambaki-Vougioukli 1988, 1992, 1993, 2006, 2007). Therefore, using a dictionary might be a very important strategy, common in all three components of a person's strategic competence; nonetheless it is not self-evident and should be systematically taught in order that the learners could make the best of it.

Dictionary use as a factor for accuracy and confidence

All researchers suggest ways for efficient dictionary use which will lead to a satisfactory degree of comprehension, i.e. use for accuracy; nevertheless, are the learners confident enough with this information so that they should use it in their everyday life, i.e. to learn from it? Confidence factor and whether it affects accuracy was first investigated in a series of inference tests conducted with Greek learners of English (Kambaki 1992) children speakers of Greek as a Foreign/Second Language, from ex-USSR (Kambaki 2001). As the results were encouraging, we went on to apply the confidence factor to another study (Kambaki 2006), concerning dictionary use of four (4) speakers of Turkish MT, this time. Our subjects' accuracy and confidence dramatically rose after dictionary use and, even more so, they started using the actual words in oral and written speech. However, such an issue needs further investigation especially when prominent researchers such as Bensoussan et al. (1984) claim there was no significant difference in accuracy before and after dictionary use. Therefore, we went on to investigate our hypotheses further in two longitudinal studies with (a) Greek monolingual dictionaries to investigate the subjects' performance in Greek (Kambaki 2007) and (b) English-Greek and Greek-English dictionaries to investigate the subjects' performance in English, the results of which we will discuss immediately. This is the right time to emphasize that the goal of our research is not to evaluate certain dictionaries but to make the best of whatever resource is available in the specific circumstances.

The research

Hypotheses

We claim that the systematic instruction and practice in using dictionaries will have beneficial effect initially on the learners' capacity to understand what they read and later on their written and oral performance. Moreover, after having consolidated this strategy, their confidence will be boosted and they will be more self-dependant in their study.

Method

Subjects

In September 2004, we handed out 105 questionnaires to pupils attending a *frondistirion*, an evening school offering tuition at a fee. The questions included information such as age, gender, socioeconomic and educational status of the parents, whether the learners attend the GSchool or the MPSchool, what age they started learning English, whether they use dictionaries for comprehension or production or both, what marks they get at school etc. We took back 73 complete questionnaires and from those we chose sixteen pupils, eight male eight female, aged 13-14.

Design

Eight children, four boys and four girls, constitute the experimental group and the other eight the control group, selected to fulfil the requirements: (i) their parents speak Greek and live in the urban area, (ii) the pupils do not normally use dictionaries, (iii) their marks in English were 14/20 to 16/20, (iv) they all attend the Greek State School.

Materials and tasks

The teachers and the researcher, all working together, chose paragraphs of 80-100 words each from textbooks, of a slightly higher level of difficulty than the ones used by the subjects in order

to ensure they had not met them before. Each passage was estimated to contain 8-12 unknown items. The task was a reading comprehension test first using inference and then dictionaries.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted at two stages: Part I for four weeks, mid-October 2004 to end of November 2004 and Part II for three weeks March and April 2005. We met twice a week, for 90 minutes each session and all the tasks had to be completed within that time. That is, we devoted 4 teaching hours for 7 weeks or a total of 28 hours.

Scoring of accuracy and confidence

We adopted the following way for the assessment of the data on accuracy: 3 for a "correct" answer, 2 for "satisfactory", 1 for "satisfactory enough" and 0 for "not satisfactory". As for confidence: 3 = I am absolutely sure, 2 = I am reasonably sure, 1= I am rather unsure, 0 = I am extremely unsure.

Results-discussion

Results of Part I of the experiment

Weeks 1 and 2

Three teachers of English, all teachers of the participants, projected the paragraph and read the passage aloud a couple of times. Teachers and pupils, all together, decided about the unknown words—only six at this stage—discussing amongst themselves, underlined them in their handouts and on the transparencies and the teachers started acting as if they were learners trying to decode them, using cues in the surrounding context. Meanwhile the children started to suggest their own guesses, in the language they preferred of the three available, English, Greek and Turkish; they seemed to enjoy it. During the last 30 minutes, the teachers introduced the dictionary (a) to confirm the meanings they had guessed were correct, and (b) to look up the ones they had not managed to guess. It was at this very early stage that we found out that they had difficulty with the order of the letters in the alphabet and as a result, they took up a lot of time to look the words up in the dictionary and feel frustrated. However, the problem with the Latin alphabet was not as serious as the one with the Greek alphabet we encountered in the parallel study where Greek was the target language (see Kambaki 2007). As for their attitude towards the task, some of the learners found it fascinating, others seemed and acted bored. The whole procedure was tape-recorded and given to the learners to listen to it at home. The same process was applied once more the same week (for a sample of their results see App., table 1) and twice the following week with the teachers acting as models and the learners mainly watching and, when confident, participating, as well. The number of unknown items reached a total of 50 words.

Weeks 3 and 4

The third week the learners were gathered and were announced that they would be divided into pairs, one member of which would act as Sherlock Holmes and the other as Dr. Watson. We explained who Holmes and Watson are and we encouraged them to come and watch a video from a TV series next evening. Then, we projected the passage on the screen, had them to read it aloud, decide on the words they did not know, underlined and numbered them and asked them to try to decode the information acting as if they were the two famous detectives. This theatrical approach seems to have worked even for the previously bored ones. We also asked them to work silently, so as not to be overheard by their rivals, and reveal their findings. They all had to use inference and prior knowledge at the first stage, not a dictionary. After they had reached a guess they were asked to specify their confidence in each guess, each learner separately, on the four-grade scale provided at the bottom of the handouts. Finally, we asked one pair to explain how they had reached each guess and be recorded. These protocols are of great interest and constitute subject for separate research.

The next step was to use their dictionaries and they were warned not to forget to check if the guess they had made fitted by looking at the context. The three teachers went around the class making sure that everything was under control. Finally, they were asked again to estimate their

confidence on the second scale. This time they had to re-estimate the guesses they had made before dictionary use by specifying their confidence again on the four-grade scale. The same process was applied three more times and 40 new words were identified.

Results of Part II of the experiment

In mid-March we gathered again, we divided the experimental group in four pairs, we gave them the passage and we allowed dictionary use to two pairs and no dictionary to the other two. We told them that they had to compete to be the first to finish, try to give the correct answers and identify their confidence on a four-grade scale. The same process was repeated with different texts, five more times in the next three weeks and a total of 50 new words were identified, i.e. about 150 new words was the final collection. During the last session we also invited the eight children of the control group, and after having been explained about the process, they also participated. However, we will present only a small sample of their results here in relation to the experimental group (Appendix, Tables 2 and 3), only to get some idea and make some comparisons.

Results interpretation-discussion

The first MANOVA conducted at the end of week 2 revealed a statistically significant, p=.024, difference in accuracy before and after dictionary use. Furthermore, there was a significant difference in confidence, p= .015; however, there is an interesting finding that needs further investigation and this is the overconfidence of males and underconfidence of females- possibly due to cultural reasons, boys are more encouraged than females to receive education by the families. As a result they are clearly more confident—even overconfident. Similar results were identified with Greek learners from ex-USSR learning Greek, i.e. in L2 environment, when they first arrived to Greece (Kambaki-Vougioukli, 2001).

The second MANOVA conducted after the end of Part II, yielded a remarkable result, which again needs further investigation, in case it is due to coincidence. Still the difference of accuracy, before and after dictionary use, is statistically significant, p=.022, but confidence levels seem to be more balanced, i.e. when the learners are accurate, they seem to be aware of it and score confident, too. On the other hand, if they are not very happy with their guess, this is reflected on their confidence scoring which is also low. Interestingly, this balance seems to be more regular among females rather than males, who seem to be more confident after dictionary use, anyway. However, we need correlations to be mathematically precise in our assumptions.

All in all, our original assumption about the contribution of dictionaries in accuracy and confidence seems to have been justified. This is reinforced by the results of three cloze-tests containing certain items of the 150 new ones the pupils had met during the whole process. Both groups participated but most of the experimental group made 100% successful guesses and were confident, too, while the control group' scores in both accuracy and confidence were extremely low and inconsistent, i.e. overconfident with wrong guesses and underconfident with correct ones. Furthermore, as we established a ranging in accuracy, which gives a chance to half-correct answers rather than the usual correct not correct ones, we believe that we could provide an explanation to certain researchers' assumptions, such as Bensoussan's et al (1984) that there was no significant difference of accuracy before and after dictionary use Anyway, as mentioned above, the results are still being processed and some even more interesting assumptions might shed more light to this major issue.

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Appendix

Experimental GROUP: before dictionary use(bd)—after dictionary use (ad)

NAME	AHMET		SADIK		SIBEL		EMINE	
	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad
ITEM 1	1 - 3	1 - 3	1 - 1	2 - 3	2 - 3	1 - 3	1 - 1	0 - 1
ITEM 2	2 - 2	1 - 3	1 - 2	2 - 3	2 - 2	2 - 3	1 - 2	0 - 1
ITEM 3	0 - 1	0 - 1	0 - 0	2 - 3	0 - 1	1 - 2	0 - 1	0 - 1
ITEM 4	1 - 3	0 - 3	1 - 2	2 - 3	1 - 3	1 - 3	0 - 2	0 - 1

Table 1: Weeks 1 and 2

Experimental GROUP: before dictionary use—after dictionary use

NAME	AHMET		SADIK		SIBEL		EMINE	
	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad
ITEM 1	2 - 3	2 - 3	0 - 2	2 - 3	3 - 3	2 - 3	2 - 3	1 - 2
ITEM 2	2 - 3	1 - 3	1 - 3	2 - 3	3 - 3	1 - 2	2 - 2	1 - 1
ITEM 3	3 - 3	2 - 3	0 - 1	2 - 3	3 - 3	2 - 3	2 - 3	1 - 2
ITEM 4	0 - 3	0 - 3	1 - 3	2 - 3	1 - 3	1 - 3	1 - 2	1 - 1

Table 2: Weeks 3 and 4

Control GROUP: before dictionary use—after dictionary use

NAME	JEMALI		SAMI		ESARJE		ADELE	
	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad	ACC bd-ad	CONF bd-ad
ITEM 1	1 - 2	1 - 3	1 - 2	1 - 3	2 - 3	1 - 2	2 - 3	1 -2
ITEM 2	1 - 2	0 - 3	2 - 3	0 - 3	0 - 1	0 - 2	1 - 2	0 -1
ITEM 3	1 - 1	0 - 2	1 - 1	0 - 3	2 - 2	1 - 3	1 - 1	1 -1
ITEM 4	0 - 1	0 - 2	0 - 0	0 - 0	0 - 0	1 - 0	0 - 1	0 - 0

Table 3