

## PLEADING FOR THE STUDENTS' FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND USING STRATEGIES DEVELOPMENT IN THE ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### ***Abstract***

*The current economic context expects that engineering graduates should have a wide range of both technical/hard skills and soft ones. It is the role of higher education to equip students with soft skills to support them in successfully accessing jobs (inter)nationally. This study therefore aims to propose an approach focused on developing the learners' language learning and language using strategic repertoire. A chronological cross section of recent evolutions in the approach to teaching foreign languages in a Romanian technical university is given and a research project is briefly discussed, which should be seen as a proposal open to optimization.*

**Keywords:** language learning strategies, language using strategies, ESP, eclectic methodology, innovation.

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### ***1. Main aims of the paper and general background***

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There are numerous recent international documents (European Commission - Education and Training, 2004), that should be read as warnings regarding the current stage which characterizes our society both nationally and internationally. It is obviously a transient period of time; however, one can foresee the interest of most countries in re-shaping their economy along the main lines of globalization, maintaining at the same time their self-conscience. The focus seems to have become the building up of a Europe that learns. A teacher of foreign languages such as English, a major language of international circulation, the author of this study has tried to identify some efficient manners in which she could develop her learners' repertoire of language learning strategies (LLS) and language using strategies (LUS).

It might be of interest to add to this preamble of aims that, by so doing, the author has also developed her own profile in terms of personal and professional evolution.

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To begin with, the general trends in the evolution of language teaching pedagogy are given – actually it is an X-ray picture, required in order to place the evolution of the foreign language teaching Romanian approach against the background of a larger context. Thus, we – teachers and also designers of our own courses - may get a more clear image of what the foci should be for each type of course we are designing/teaching (such as General English, ESP, CLIL) and also as regards the manner of integrating them in an appropriately justified pedagogical construct.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the concept of "communicative competence" appeared (Hymes, 1972) for the first time. Ever since, the ideas of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which meant a definite methodological shift towards socio-centric views, have largely spread. Other elements in the evolution of language teaching/learning/evaluating methodology that should not be disregarded have been the development - in the contemporary world - of IT means, as well as of a more and more globalizing market, conducive gradually to an enhanced importance attached to what has been called *eclectic* views, nevertheless with a strong pedagogical rationale underlying the options made. At present, this core of the eclectic strongly communicative approach oriented methodology has generated a spate of various directions in the current practice, in function of each concrete educational context, with its needs and objectives. Such focuses can be: implementing IT, multiculturalism, learning to learn, autonomy etc. Options have to be verified in practice and adapted/optimized continually, in order to embed coherently both the synthetic and analytic components of the syllabus (Hadley, 2001). We can see such options located on a continuum, whose extremities are, on the one hand, the *synthetic* approaches, with a strong focus on the structure of the language, and up to identifying/teaching English for specific contexts, such as in the case of ESP or EAP. Conversely, in the case of *analytic* patterns, the emphasis will be placed on the kinds of skills students may need to acquire the language in the best possible manner, in other words on *learning*.

The *eclectic* trend encourages trainers to make use of elements from various teaching models, since the aspect of real significance is actually to help one's students to understand "how to learn" and "how to think in various ways" (Saphier & Gower, 1997). Among the newest directions in language teaching we can list, according the literature (Jacobs and Farrell, 2001): "learner's autonomy, cooperative learning, curricular integration, emphasis on meaning, diversity, teacher as co-learner and alternative evaluation".

It is of interest, therefore, that teachers should resort to more than one restricted model, as by using a blend, there will be higher chances of harmonizing the teaching with the students' favourite learning styles. On the other hand, though, it is not to be disregarded that the teacher should also try to enlarge the learners' strategic repertory beyond their initial/favoured learning style or pattern of thinking. Such views are encouraged in the literature. We have moved (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006) from the "era of method" towards a period when we are

”beyond” the method – which means that a range of options should be encouraged in an eclectic type of approach, with flexibility, investigation and receptivity at the fore. The common purpose is for all teachers, however, to enhance pedagogical efficiency by innovative elements introduced in one’s approach to the teaching of the foreign language. Simultaneously, the approach applied should also increase the possibilities of maximizing lifelong learning opportunities and, implicitly, autonomous learning.

While maintaining an orientation towards enhancing quality, teachers should permanently keep wondering, as pointed out in the literature (Wolverton, 1994) whether the path adopted could not be bettered in another way – it is the requirement/warning that any teacher attempting to introduce innovation should foster reflection as a form of enriching control tool in their research endeavour which comprises three main interconnected phases: ”self-information, experimenting, feedback”.

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## ***2. Stages in the post-1990 Romanian experience of English language teaching – a radiograph***

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This section is devoted to presenting the evolution phases in the author’s concrete educational context and also at national level in Romania’s non-philological higher education after 1990. Thus, the approach to the teaching/learning of English in the POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest (UPB) can be seen as an example of the main features of the stages conducive to the current one, characterized by an interest in continuously rendering the instructional process more and more efficient in a sustainable manner. Certainly, these stages should not be seen as fully distinct ones, therefore we will try to briefly present their essential components together with our own evolution.

Immediately after 1990 and up to 1993-1994, the change brought about by the implementation of the PROSPER Project (Adam et al., 1999), meant to optimize the teaching of English in the non-philological higher education in UPB, as a founding member and active participant in the project (alongside with other five institutions), was not actually very visible. There were still the modalities of approaching the teaching/learning of the grammar-translational type, as well of the audiolingual one, but, on the other hand, they were cohabiting with the then ’new’ ones – of the communicative type. The latter were at their infancy, not only in terms of implementation, but also as far as a full understanding of the theoretical rationale for the practical options were concerned. We believe that the first stage was a perfectly natural one, given the pace of implementing change in our university.

Although it is difficult to sum up the change in only a few main aspects, we will point out to the areas in which, according to the Impact Study carried out upon the conclusion of the PROSPER Project (op.cit.), considerable differences occurred,

mostly oriented towards the communicative approach to the teaching of English: the course main *objectives* shift towards the students, particularly as regards their studying processes; stress is put on the development of the main *skills* – speaking, listening, reading, writing; teaching is based on a logical chain of *tasks* meant to encourage the students to use their language knowledge in situations closely approximating those they will come across in their future professional life; the main *interaction forms* include pair/group work alongside with individual or full class ones, with new *roles* assumed by the students, which encourages *communication*; the *teacher* is no longer the main figure of authority, assuming new *roles*, mainly that of a *facilitator* of the learning process taking place; the teacher contributes to creating a positive encouraging classroom *atmosphere*, meant to help the learners to take initiative and thus implicitly to become more responsible for their own learning process; *error correction* is modified, now errors are seen as external manifestations of the searching effort inherent to any learning process; implicitly, *feedback* is provided on the spot only when the lesson focus is on *accuracy*, but it is postponed if *fluency* is envisaged.

After the end of the PROSPER Project, i.e. since 1995, for about ten years we witnessed a more and more participatory self-aware involvement of the UPB English language teachers' activity aiming to shape up the process of teaching and learning efficiently, on improved theoretical grounds, which should correspond to the requirements of the society as far as our students' level of communicative competence was concerned. Most teachers embarked upon doing research conducive to the identification of the ways to improve their own didactic activity, by designing new methodological paths and by operating practical selections, more fully justified from the pedagogical point of view. The main features of that stage, as they emerge from the same study (Adam et al., 1999), can briefly show a typical profile of the group/class of the mainly communicative kind: a wide range of task based activities is used, thus encouraging the development of the students' cognitive processes; emphasis is placed on both accuracy and fluency in communication, with a variety of supporting activities meant to develop the required subskills in these respects; authentic materials are used, they are selected and/or adapted by the teacher/designer in order to answer the medium and long term needs of the learners; there is a variety of patterns of interaction meant to enhance communication.

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### ***3. Attempting innovation in response to the contemporary society needs – focus on strategies***

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We are still very much at the stage in which the dominant methodological views are of a *communicative* type, which has yielded more efficient results worldwide than the approaches specific to the previous stages, as it answers to a high extent to the demands of the present time, which require from the students, would-be

graduates of the technical higher education, a higher level of *communicative competence* in English.

However, a new phase has gradually appeared in the development of the teaching/learning approach in the UPB over the last years, with more diversified fields of research interests meant to better answer the current needs of the students. One of these directions of scientific interest, that is focused on developing the students' English LLS and LUS, will be presented in more detail in this section.

The main lines of action that were aimed at were as follows:

- providing help to the students in reaching a B2/C1 level (CEFR, 2001);
- supporting the learners to develop the range of skills that would be of utmost importance for engineers in their professional activity;
- enabling trainees to expand their repertoire of both strategy types (i.e. language learning and language using), which they should then develop at the post-graduation stage in an autonomous manner.

The factors of the concrete situation that was the object of the research comprised:

- the professional profile of the learners, who were IT students, requiring sound knowledge of English, at a quite advanced level,
- a high degree of their motivation in developing their communicative competence in English for mid- and long-term needs,
- the high number of students of this faculty, which keeps increasing, in response to the job market needs, thus creating a better visibility of the aimed at sector, with a range of goals and objectives clearly oriented towards the optimization and enhanced efficiency of the teaching/learning of English,
- the exceedingly limited time given to the language classes in the curriculum, viz. at Bachelor level only, amounting to max. 112 hours/two years.

Under the described circumstances - and implicitly limitations, the role of the teacher becomes very important. They should try to provide well fundamented, from the theoretical point of view, solutions, that should be checked in practice.

Given the fact that the university encourages innovative research, certainly with the observance of the main directions of its educational program, an approach of the informed, educated eclectic type (**Richards & Rodgers, 1986**) to the teaching of English was designed and implemented. Thus, the inclusion of LLS and LUS in a coherent systematic manner in the teaching of English to the Computer Science Faculty was aimed at. We intended to check if that would be conducive to an increase of the efficiency of the teaching/learning of the foreign language.

This inclusion can be achieved in two manners. One possibility, suggested in the literature (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989) consists in introducing a course entirely devoted to developing strategy repertoire building, meant to give support to the trainees in discovering those patterns and paths that are most appropriate for them.

However, there is another option, viz. to implicitly or explicitly insert certain tasks focused on raising the learners' awareness in the course of language. We favoured the latter option, due to the above mentioned profile requirements and constraints. There are some advantages in this procedure (Nunan, 1991), for instance the fact that the students become more aware not only of their favourite learning modes, but also of the fact that they are given options not only as regards that *what*, but also the *how* in their learning process. This may encourage them to become more flexible in their ways of learning and also to continue to experiment with new modalities that could further enrich their strategic repertoire.

Our research was a multiple-focus one. It was intended to check whether it is useful to extend the significance of the concept of strategic competence and correlate it with LLS and LUS. It was also meant to verify if the efficiency degree in the instructional process can be enhanced by embedding a cycle of activities whose aims were to increase the awareness level and acquisition of LLS and LUS, thus maximizing the learners' strategic repertoire, which would be used after the course autonomously.

Another line of research was to create, teach and examine useful ways and manners of enhancing the trainees' communicative competence by the insertion of strategies in the portfolio of skills provided to the students. Similarly, to determine if, by so doing in a coherent approach, this would be conducive to academic success, thus confirming the utility of the specially designed one-term module taught experimentally.

Finally, but certainly of equal importance, we wanted to check the transferability in terms of teaching of the original module created and also to emphasize the need for consistent teacher training as regards the area of introducing LLS and LUS focused materials. Consequently, a number of five hypotheses were formulated, in line with the above presented directions of research.

The research activity was of the empirical applicative kind, action oriented, as it aimed to improve the given context. It also had a processual perspective, with various forms of evaluation applied at the beginning, during and after the experiment proper.

A 14-week original experimental module of *English for Computer Science (ECS)* at upper-intermediate/advanced level was devised, focused mainly on developing reading and writing skills. This was conceptually different from the one taught to witness groups, of the communicative type, by the fact that original and adapted activities, focused on LLS and LUS development, were embedded in it in various

ways: in some cases, the modalities of inserting the strategy awareness raising activities were not strictly demarcated from the language oriented ones, while in other units the activities had a common core for both modules, followed by separate sections with different foci for the two distinct materials. The major module aim was to enhance the trainees' awareness as to certain strategies of immediate utility, particularly at the post English course stage.

On a sample of 200 students, a range of data collecting instruments were used – with certain limitations, of course, but which did not significantly affect the emerged trends:

- tests and portfolios of the students,
- questionnaires addressed to students and graduates,
- interviews taken to good language learners,
- students' diaries,
- case studies.

In the case of some instruments, they were actually implemented in class as tools meant to increase the students' awareness of the need to develop their strategic repertoire. For instance, the interviews with the students voted by their colleagues as 'good language learners' were included as listening and note-taking instances, with a view to providing good ideas and examples of good practice to the other learners. Similarly, the student end-of-seminar diaries were analyzed by the teacher/researcher in their content evolution, as far as the students' increasing awareness of what exactly LLS and LUS meant. Moreover, evaluation instruments, such as the students' portfolios, played a double role: (i) they provided an image of the students' progress and effort in learning throughout the observed term for assessment purposes, and (ii) they were actual research instruments, giving feedback in response to the main research hypotheses.

The quantitative and qualitative data obtained by implementing the research instruments were processed and analyzed, based on triangulation.

The analyzed aspects comprised:

- success in learning;
- level of communication competence in English;
- progress in the writing and reading skills;
- awareness of the strategic repertoire in learning and using a foreign language (English);
- level of trainees' involvement and motivation;
- assuming responsibility by the learners themselves for the instructional process quality and efficiency;
- teaching process improvement.

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#### ***4. Open conclusions - as an arena for opinions and further research***

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A proposal of a research study meant to enhance the efficiency in the teaching/learning of a foreign language (English) in the tertiary engineering education as a result of implementing a set of original LLS and LUS focused activities in the ECS course was designed, applied and analyzed.

Some trends emerged and some answers to the issues raised in the research project were provided – all the hypotheses were confirmed.

The conclusions that can be drawn at the post-research stage should be seen as having an *open* character, inviting further ideas from fellow teachers interested in research in the same area.

Firstly, the research confirmed its usefulness, as *optimization* of learning occurred as a statistically significant trend in the experimental group. Thus, we can state that there are good premises that the course efficiency will grow, which would involve an increase in the learners' level of communicative competence.

Furthermore, it appears that this is a way of enhancing the learning autonomy level of the students – an important outcome, considering the expectations from any employee of the current labour market that is undergoing permanent change.

This comes in direct connection with the fact that the array of skills which the student, who is the future graduate, actually needs on medium and long term must be selected very carefully and on the basis on a thorough needs analysis.

At the same time, it is highly recommendable to attach significance to the choice of the ways of embedding LLS and LUS in the language course – their identification and implementation should take into consideration both the existing expertise in the field and the constraints specific to each concrete educational context.

The results obtained so far have encouraged us to share our experience with teachers who are also interested in attaining the same objectives, but in different situations as far as the following are concerned:

- main course objectives,
- students' profile,
- facilities/equipment,
- timeframe.

One of the main conclusions that has also emerged from our investigation is the necessity that teachers who wish to embark upon such an activity should receive specialized training. There are good chances, we believe, that this should be conducive to an increase in their permanent process of professional and personal development.

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