**DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM – SURVEY OF STUDENTS’ HABITS**

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**Introduction**

As Maley (2009, p. 7) states, advance learners should show a certain degree of autonomy and responsibility for their own improvement in language. A good learner, according to Thorbury (2006, p. 115), looks for situations to use language actively, monitors their own performance and pays attention to accuracy. In the authors’ experience, precision is something that advanced students need to focus on if their language proficiency is to develop further.

University students cross the border between adolescence and adulthood during their studies, entering university with certain learning styles and strategies developed previously. In Ur’s (2012, p.268) view, adult learners are not easily satisfied and tend to be more critical than younger learners. Two out of the Ten Commandments for Motivating Language Learners by Dörnyei and Csizér (in Thornbury, 2006, p. 138) seem to be especially useful with university students of English - promoting learner autonomy and personalising the learning process.

In accordance with that, Harmer (2007, p. 394) suggests supporting students in using English outside the classroom and believes that “students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies” to achieve the above mentioned autonomy.

Learning strategies are generally divided into six categories - cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective and social (Oxford, 2001, p. 359; Harmer, 2007, p. 396). Hedge (2000, p. 78-79) however, distinguishes only four – cognitive, metacognitive, communicative and socio-affective. The survey presented below touches upon the area of cognitive and metacognitive strategies especially and also the socio-affective one.

At the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc (henceforth DE), language practice is a compulsory course both in the bachelor (five semesters) and the follow-up magister study programme (three semesters). Enhancing the level of proficiency is one of the priorities in the pre-service teacher training and students should reach at least the C1 level of English according to CEFR. Reaching this level of proficiency needs to be supported by continuous and regular work, it is therefore necessary to promote future teachers’ learning besides regular lessons.

**The survey**

This paper analyses the results of a questionnaire survey conducted among students of English at the DE. The survey investigated in what situations students use English in their free time and also concentrated on their study habits.

The aim of the survey was to map students’ experience with using English besides preparation for lessons. The questionnaire was distributed among bachelor (1st and 2nd year) and magister (1st year) students during the summer term of 2013/2014. The final year students of both the bachelor and follow-up magister study programmes were excluded from the survey for two reasons. Firstly, the survey was carried out in the summer term, in which the final year students do not have language practice lessons. Secondly, the purpose of the survey was to chart the current situation so that modifications to the language practice course can be made. This can be therefore done only with the students who will continue with their language practice course in the following semester. The survey was carried out as a part of a university development project Innovation of the language practice course (Inovace předmětu Praktický jazyk, FRUP\_2014\_2\_051).

Altogether, 107 students participated in the survey. In these, there were 40 students of the 1st year and 49 students of the 2nd year of the bachelor programme. The rest, i.e. 18 respondents, were students of the 1st year of the magister programme. The group of magister students is smaller, still, clear tendencies in the students’ answers can be observed.

The questionnaire consisted of four basic questions with multiple-choice answers. In each question, the respondents were provided with space to add their own comment. The questionnaire aimed at finding out what students do with English in their free time and whether they consciously use the opportunities available to them to enhance their language proficiency.

**1 Frequency**

The first question aimed at ascertaining the frequency of students’ using English outside the classroom, excluding the effort they put into preparation for school.

Overall, the majority of the respondents (69.2%) claim to use English on a daily basis, 25.2% every other day and the rest, 5.6%, maintain they use English in their free time once a week.

Interestingly, the 1st year bachelor students seem to be using English most often (77.5% of them every day) while all the students who chose the once-a-week option are 2nd year bachelor students (see Table 1 below).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| % | every day | every other day | once a week |
| 1st year Bc students | 77.5 | 22.5 | 0 |
| 2nd year Bc students | 65.3 | 22.4 | 12.2 |
| 1st year Mgr students | 61.1 | 38.9 | 0 |
| Total % (out of 107) | 69.2 | 25.2 | 5.6 |

Table 1: How often do you use English in your free time?

**2 Situations**

The purpose of the second question was to determine in what circumstances students typically use English. The options provided in the questionnaire were selected to cover all four language skills and provide wide enough variety for the respondents to choose from (see Table 2 below). In some options, the students were asked to specify e.g. the book genre, magazine titles, but only a minority actually did so.

As can be seen in Table 2, the two most frequently chosen situations are watching films and listening to songs (both reaching the total 99%), followed by reading books (78.5%). There does not seem to be a significant difference between the answers of the bachelor and magister students.

Among the film genres, the students repeatedly mentioned comedies and sci-fi and fantasy genres, sitcoms and TV series. Science fiction and fantasy also seem to be popular concerning book genres. Interestingly, quite a few students say they read compulsory literature mostly, which probably cannot be classified as a purely free time activity.

Altogether 48.6% of the students state they read online magazines, newspapers or articles. In this case, a significant majority of magister students (72.2%), in contrast to about 40% of the bachelor students, claim to devote time to this activity. It might be deduced that with the increasing level of proficiency and experience, students tend to be more confident and use English online sources more freely. The online media listed, besides most commonly mentioned traditional sources such as BBC, The Guardian or The Times, included magazines or web pages clearly related to students’ hobbies (sport, music, PC games, lifestyle etc.).

In comparison to that, printed media do not appear to be popular (10.3%). The magazine titles mentioned related mostly to fashion or lifestyle. Some of the students noted down the magazines Gate and Bridge, which are educational materials intended for lower and upper secondary school learners. The question is whether even university students read these magazines or the respondents mentioned the ones they used to read in the past.

Perhaps surprisingly, but in accordance with Seidlhofer’s assertions “that non-native users of English now outnumber native speakers” (2003, p. 7), the students claim to speak face-to-face more commonly with non-native speakers (37.5%) than native speakers (15%). However, via the internet, they communicate more frequently with native rather than non-native speakers (41.1% and 29% respectively).

36.4% of the students state they write emails in English, once again the percentage is significantly higher in the group of magister students (61.1%). It might be due to the fact that these students are more in contact with (non)-native speakers.

42.1% of the respondents claim they use English while playing computer games. Listening to audio books received 13.1% of the students’ answers; the percentage is slightly higher in the group of magister students. Less than a third of the students (29%) state they listen to the radio in English, the most commonly noted being the BBC.

A number of students pointed out other situations in which they use English, among those repeatedly listed were translating, teaching English, helping their family and friends with English or watching YouTube videos.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| % | 1st year Bc students | 2nd year Bc students | 1st year Mgr students | Total % (out of 107) |
| reading books | 80 | 75.5 | 83.3 | 78.5 |
| reading printed magazines | 10 | 12.2 | 5.6 | 10.3 |
| reading online magazines | 45 | 42.9 | 72.2 | 48.6 |
| listening to the radio | 27.5 | 30.6 | 27.8 | 29 |
| listening to audio books | 12.5 | 10.2 | 22.2 | 13.1 |
| listening to songs | 100 | 98 | 100 | 99 |
| speaking with native speakers – in person | 7.5 | 14.3 | 33.3 | 15 |
| speaking with native speakers – on the internet | 52.5 | 34.7 | 33.3 | 41.1 |
| speaking with non-native speakers – in person | 32.5 | 38.8 | 44.4 | 37.4 |
| speaking with non-native speakers – on the internet | 37.5 | 18.4 | 38.9 | 29 |
| writing emails | 35 | 28.6 | 61.1 | 36.4 |
| watching films | 100 | 98 | 100 | 99 |
| playing computer games | 52.5 | 32.7 | 44.4 | 42.1 |
| other | 30 | 14.3 | 33.3 | 23.4 |

Table 2: In what situations do you usually use English in your free time?

**3 Most common situations**

Question 3 is closely connected with the previous one. The students were supposed to list three situations in which they use English most frequently.

Table 3 below contains six most common situations as listed by the students. As can be seen, there are two activities that tended to be chosen by fewer students of the magister group than the bachelor group - watching films and playing computer games, intriguingly, the latter was not ranked by any magister student among the three most common activities. On the other hand, magister students seem to read online magazines and speak with non-native speakers more often. These differences might be attributed to the fact that magister students are more mature than the bachelor ones and therefore their interests have already shifted from pure entertainment (playing PC games) to so called edutainment (reading online magazines). Additionally, being senior students, they have had more time to come into contact with fellow international students, travel abroad, etc.

The percentage of students reading books seems to be decreasing from bachelor to magister studies. As expected, listening to songs and watching films were listed by most students among the top three activities. Most students say they listen to songs and watch films every day.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| % | 1st year Bc students | 2nd year Bc students | 1st year Mgr students | Total %  (out of 107) |
| listening to songs | 80 | 75.5 | 94.4 | 80.4 |
| watching films | 85 | 81.6 | 50 | 77.6 |
| reading books | 45 | 36.7 | 27.8 | 38.3 |
| reading online magazines | 10 | 26.5 | 38.9 | 22.4 |
| speaking with non-native speakers | 10 | 18.4 | 44.4 | 19.6 |
| playing computer games | 25 | 16.3 | 0 | 16.8 |

Table 3: Which of the activities do you do most often?

**4 Students’ habits**

The final question of the questionnaire was designed to determine the students’ habits in their free time. The aim of the last question was to find out if the students work consciously with English in their free time and involve metacognitive strategies to learn and improve their language proficiency. The students were supposed to choose the statements that are true for them.

The assumption was that students pay attention to vocabulary but much less to grammar, which the data appear to have proven. The majority of the students state they try to remember (96.3%) and use (75.7%) new vocabulary, 73.8% of the students claim they try to remember new structures but only 46.7% state they try to use them.

Similarly, more students say they notice vocabulary than structures learned in the lessons (69.2% and 55.1% respectively). Although both cases were chosen by more than 50% of the students, the answers may seem fairly unexpected as students usually complain that the language learned in the lessons is not applicable outside the classroom.

According to the answers, students do not tend to keep regular entries on the language features they come across. If yes, they keep a vocabulary book and only a few keep a notebook of grammatical structures.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| % | 1st year Bc students | 2nd year Bc students | 1st year Mgr students | Total % (out of 107) |
| I try to remember new vocabulary I come across. | 97.5 | 93.9 | 100 | 96.3 |
| I try to remember new structures I come across. | 80 | 69.4 | 72.2 | 73.8 |
| I note down new vocabulary I come across. | 30 | 28.6 | 50 | 32.7 |
| I note down new structures I come across. | 7.5 | 14.3 | 27.8 | 14 |
| I try to use new vocabulary I come across. | 80 | 81.6 | 50 | 75.7 |
| I try to use new structures I come across. | 55 | 34.7 | 61.1 | 46.7 |
| I notice the vocabulary learnt in the classroom in real life. | 67.5 | 65.3 | 83.3 | 69.2 |
| I notice the structures learnt in the classroom in real life. | 42.5 | 59.2 | 72.2 | 55.1 |
| I keep a vocabulary book. | 35 | 24.5 | 33.3 | 29.9 |
| I keep a grammatical notebook. | 25 | 4.1 | 11.1 | 13.1 |

Table 4: Students’ habits in their free time

**Conclusion**

The survey has shown that the magister students appear to be more autonomous learners and seek challenging opportunities to practise English. Having already gone through the bachelor studies, some of these students took part in the Erasmus exchange programme or took a year off travelling, thus gaining experience and making international contacts they now maintain.

Nevertheless, the students throughout both study programmes pay less attention to grammar than vocabulary and not even the magister students sufficiently use study notebooks. Students should probably be specifically asked and supported to notice and note down structural features of the language.

According to the survey, the students make use of frequent and multiple opportunities to use English, yet especially their metacognitive strategies need to be enhanced.

One of the aims of the project (see The survey above) is to support students’ active learning besides regular lessons. The project aims to encourage students to keep language logs based on their free time encounters with English and to share portions of their language logs with other students in the lessons in so called language corners. Thus, socio-affective, cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies should be promoted.

The language logs and corners should help develop students’ active thinking, drawing upon their personal experience as shown in the survey. Students should be supported to use online articles, films and songs as a rich language corpus to analyze. Contact with non-native speakers might provide them with opportunities to recognize errors and inaccuracies. Besides developing language proficiency, language logs and language corners should help magister students develop their teaching skills.

All the acquired data will be used in the following semesters of the language practice course to direct the students towards, hopefully, more effective exploitation of language sources and more effective learning strategies to reach the desired proficiency level.

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**Resumé**

Článek představuje výsledky dotazníkového šetření mezi budoucími učiteli, studenty Katedry anglického jazyka, Pedagogické fakulty, Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci. Dotazníkový průzkum mapoval, jak studenti pracují s anglickým jazykem ve svém volném čase. Šetření ukázalo, že nejčastějšími situacemi, ve kterých studenti používají anglický jazyk je sledování filmů a poslech písní. Studenti magisterského jazyka častěji čtou materiály na internetu a používají angličtinu ke komunikaci s nerodilými mluvčími. Jen menšina studentů si vede pravidelné záznamy o nové slovní zásobě a gramatických strukturách. Výsledky šetření poslouží k modifikaci kurzů praktického jazyka zavedením jazykových deníků, které podpoří rozvoj zejména metakognitivních a socioafektivních učebních strategií.

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