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Masaryk University Internationalization Project: Learner Beliefs and Expectations

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The aim of this paper is to provide useful insight into the Masaryk University Internationalization from the point of view of a teacher involved in the project, with the focus on issues such as learner beliefs, expectations and learner autonomy. The specific nature of this learning context may prove a unique opportunity to collect and analyze learner feedback on teaching methodology and the learning process itself. Identifying the nature of student beliefs is a necessary pre-requisite to understanding learner behaviour and learning strategies; through being aware of what our learners think and how they function we may be able to help them become more effective.

1 Introduction: Some Facts and Figures

The project of the so-called Internationalization was launched in October 2003, when regular English courses for non-academic staff at Masaryk University were introduced, with a view to raising the general standard of foreign language communication skills. By the year 2008, some 400 members of staff are expected to reach a level of proficiency reasonably appropriate to their professional position at the university.

2 Initial response and its possible causes

Considering the large number of people involved in this education project, there is a relatively small group of true enthusiasts – those who recognise the benefits of being able to make use of free foreign language instruction and see this opportunity as a welcome stimulus for further interest in learning English. The rest, however, seem to be less happy: either they endure the study for the sake of their job, or complain very explicitly.

From the start of the project, teachers and administrators have been encountering a considerable degree of resistance among the students when introducing this unwelcome responsibility. During the length of the project there has been sad evidence of whole groups seriously unable to cope with the challenge of learning a foreign language. During the early stages of the project, many people were continually complaining and threatening to quit their courses; in some extreme cases, nervous breakdowns *in class* were reported. Even now, when the courses have already been running for more than a year, there are still a few cases of obvious “trouble-makers”, who have been going to considerable lengths to either avoid the courses completely or to continue to resist strongly. Ironically, these are also the instances we should perhaps be grateful for: all too often students do not voice their objections even though they may feel they are not gaining as much from the language instruction as they should.

This might perhaps be the point at which this kind of feedback should be taken into account. Dismissing this and other rather negative kinds of response has only brought on bitter feelings both on the part of the learners and teachers. There are several factors which may have contributed to the creation of a stressful experience:

1. First, members of non-academic staff have been ordered by authorities to attend courses and work towards a certain level of proficiency *which their future career may depend on*, while they themselves often do not see the immediate benefit, the immediate necessity to start learning or improving their English. Over the years they have always managed somehow and find it sufficient. Many are therefore suffering from a severe *lack of motivation* for language learning, and perhaps particularly for learning English, as most of them have had experience with Russian or German only.

2. Second, people tend to see the courses in themselves as an *unwelcome imposition*, as they are forced to re-organize their working schedules to fit the necessary time in; on two days a week their daily routine has been disrupted – suddenly, they may not be able to get their children ready for school in the morning, take lunch in the *Menza*, or finish work earlier – depending on the time of their classes. The absolute majority of students have not been able to choose a suitable time for their course – they were allocated a day, a time and a place, often rather out of their way, as courses take place at different faculties. In some cases also the composition of particular groups as regards job hierarchy has been rather unfortunate.

3. As students, these people encountered a totally alien learning environment, in many ways denying all they had ever experienced in language education, running counter to their *expectations and beliefs about language teaching and learning* and about learning in general. The principles of the communicative approach inherently require a certain degree of independence (autonomy) on the part of the learner, who can no longer expect the teacher to have tight control over the learning process at all times. This autonomy applies not only to the self-study context, but in various degrees also to everyday classroom situations. Students have to be much more active and contribute more to the teaching-learning process, which has become a two-way affair.

It is the third factor, more than anything else, that shocked and amazed many of our students: within of Czech education, the notion of the teacher as a facilitator has been developing only very slowly.

3 Learner beliefs and expectations

Since the 1970s language teaching has become much more learner centred, using the kind of instruction which facilitates the development of various degrees of learner autonomy – an aim

heavily supported by research in sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology (for a detailed overview see Wenden 1991). The benefits of a more autonomous approach to learning have been commonly accepted among teachers and educators, which is inherently also reflected in the nature of current teaching materials and textbooks. An issue strongly connected with attempts to move away from more conventional teaching methods and to give learners more responsibility for their learning is that of learner beliefs and expectations.

Over the last two decades, a number of studies of students' beliefs about language learning and teaching have been reported, the focus being especially on how these beliefs influence learning strategies and learner behaviour (Horwitz 1987, Cotterall 1995, Wenden 1999, etc.). If, for instance, a learner strongly believes that errors are harmful and slow down the learning process, he/she may be rather reluctant to participate in fluency activities, which in their nature do not allow the teacher to correct *every* error immediately (Cotterall 1995). Similarly, if learners see the teacher as a strong authority figure, they will not feel it right to take more control of their learning. These beliefs then naturally turn into certain expectations about language instruction and the roles of students and teachers. If these expectations are not matched by what happens in the classroom, some students may become extremely uncomfortable, voice their objections and attempt to force the teacher into using different teaching methods.

During our teacher training courses we have all been told one of the golden rules of language teaching: *If they don't learn the way we teach, we have to teach the way they learn.* With this in mind, however, the classes would consist mainly of "doing grammar and exercises" with the teacher at the front, lecturing and occasionally calling on students to translate sentences. To oblige the students would mean to abandon the original aim of trying to produce successful learners who are able to communicate in English effectively.

Based on frequent discussions over the last year it is obvious that most teachers involved in the Internationalization project have encountered many situations where these beliefs demonstrated very strongly. It seems that in this particular context (studying English as a necessary pre-requisite for keeping one's job) people are more than ever afraid to take risks and tend to resort to their most fundamental beliefs. Some of them might even feel threatened when confronted with a different style of teaching. Whether their attitudes are stated explicitly or implied during the lesson, it is quite obvious that the students have experienced a very traditional teaching approach where the concern has primarily been with grammar and vocabulary.

To illustrate the point, table 1 shows selected examples of the vast amount of unsolicited "advice" I have collected when teaching Internationalization courses, and have recognised in the frequent laments of my fellow teachers. It is also gratifying to find that most of them can be very clearly classified in categories already identified within the great body of practical research literature on the subject.

Table 1 Selected examples of unsolicited feedback concerning the nature of teaching and learning provided by Czech EFL learners within the Masaryk University Internationalization Project.

1. Beliefs about the role of the teacher (Cotterall 1995)

- 1.1 The teacher should always tell students what and when to note down; students are not able to decide on their own what is important or useful for them.
- 1.2 Good teachers are strict teachers; you are afraid of them but they sure make you learn!
- 1.3 If no homework is given, students cannot be expected to study on their own as they have no idea of what is required.

- 1.4 The teacher should always tell students what expressions to use when they are speaking.
- 1.5 The teacher should always call on students to speak, otherwise no one will.
- 2. Beliefs about the language learning process (Horwitz 1999)**
 - 2.1 Errors are harmful, therefore it is not allowed to make them.
 - 2.2 The teacher should correct all errors immediately.
 - 2.3 Speaking in pairs or groups is not a good idea – you don't know what errors you are making and the teacher is not able to correct every one of them.
- 3. Beliefs about communication: guessing (Horwitz 1999)**
 - 3.1 Students shouldn't be asked to read an article if there are also words they do not know.
 - 3.2 If you cannot say it 100 per cent correctly, do not say it at all.
- 4. Beliefs about the language learning process: primacy of grammar (Horwitz 1999)**
 - 4.1 It is necessary to know all grammar rules to be able to speak.
 - 4.2 Learning a language means learning grammar rules.
- 5. Beliefs about the language learning process: primacy of translation (Horwitz 1999)**
 - 5.1 The best way to practice new vocabulary and structures is by way of translation.
 - 5.2 If you can translate from Czech to English, you are able to speak English.
 - 5.3 Every word must be translated – if you don't know the word in Czech, you cannot understand its meaning (this also applies to real objects, colours, etc.)
- 6. Beliefs about the role of age (Wenden 1991)**
 - 6.1 You can't do this to us at our age! It is unfair to make us learn a foreign language and then even measure (i.e. the final achievement test) how incompetent and stupid we are.
 - 6.2 It is easy to learn a foreign language when you are young. If you are close to fifty, you have no chance.
 - 6.3 Please be good to us - we are old and slow. We forget everything we learn.

4 The origins of learner beliefs and expectations

Research concerned with the nature of learner beliefs has inherently focused also on *how these beliefs are formed*. Leaving aside complex issues such as individual character, learning styles, personal anxieties and motivations unique to each learner (see Wenden 1991 for an overview of literature), there are certain common factors which may contribute to the formation of beliefs.

One such factor is unquestionably the *kind of learning and social experience* students encounter especially during their primary and secondary education, which seems to be true particularly of the issue of student autonomy and beliefs about the role of the teacher. As Wenden says, "in some cases socialization processes lead to the acquisition of beliefs that encourage dependence rather than independence on the part of the adult ... as young children, students begin to believe that to be a learner is to be dependent, and when they enter into an

educational activity as adults they expect to be treated like children” (Wenden 1991: 55-56). That is not to say that as a result, adults feel comfortable in an inferior position – on the contrary, this is precisely what our students resented most when faced with the prospect of taking regular courses of English. Surprisingly, many have expressed their gratitude at not being reprimanded and laughed at in front of the class. However, because they feel a certain mode of instruction is right, they may even put pressure on the teacher to behave in a different way.

Closely connected is the *factor of culture and national mentality*: in some countries, learning a particular foreign language effectively may be perceived more important than in others; similarly, in certain cultures the teacher may have a much more authoritarian position than in others. In short, there is evidence that attitudes towards teaching and learning are *culturally conditioned* (Litthe 2003). Hadley (2001) uses the term *power distance*, first introduced by Geert Hofstede in his research into cultural norms of different countries. In what he calls *high power distance cultures*, different power distribution is strictly respected on the basis of historical and political arrangements. Therefore, trying to change such norms makes people feel uncomfortable and anxious (Hofstede 1997, cited in Hadley 2001). This is something that is still very obvious in many Czech classrooms (and even more so within the MU Internationalization), although of course the situation has changed considerably over the last fifteen years. Many native English teachers claim that Czechs as students of English are impossible to work with: they are shy, lacking in confidence, unable to have and present ideas of their own, terrified of making themselves too conspicuous and waiting for the teacher to tell them exactly when and what to do. Considering the fact that in the not so distant past such mode of behaviour used to constitute an effective survival strategy in former Czechoslovakia, this is perhaps not so surprising.

Another important belief-forming factor is the amount of *metacognitive knowledge* a learner has, that is, how much they know about their own learning strategies and preferences and how effectively they are able to use them. To be able to approach learning a foreign language actively, a learner needs a certain set of skills and strategies – the *strategic knowledge* (Wenden 1991: 42) such as the skill of basic analysis, inductive strategies, monitoring strategies, etc. (see Wenden 1991: 22 for a comprehensive list). Here again, we come back to the issue of learning experience – if our learners have experienced a very traditional mode of instruction (teacher lecturing, students taking notes and then reproducing the teacher’s exact words), they have never been given the chance to acquire such skills, and therefore cannot be expected to use them. Obviously, this has also an impact on the teacher who may feel desperate when working with materials that inherently require these skills. Students may appear reluctant, stubborn, rebellious, less than intelligent, but in fact it may be they *simply do not have the appropriate strategies* to be able to complete a particular task.

5 The importance of learner training

As non-native teachers of English as a foreign language we have come to accept certain things as given and automatic. Recognising a useful expression, noting its usage, using a monolingual dictionary, checking the correct pronunciation, trying to use it actively in a conversation – all these and many more come naturally to us: as successful, experienced learners we have acquired these skills over the years and hardly think about them any more.

We may therefore be astonished when our students do not behave as we expect, and all too often we dismiss them as not talented for language learning, not worth the effort we put into our instruction. However, it is important to realize that our learners may not have had the same learning experience as we have. Considering the average age, education and interests

of the students involved in the Internationalization project, it is obvious that most of them have only experienced foreign language instruction as part of primary and secondary education, in its very traditional, teacher-centered form. Consequently, a lot of them have not had the necessary training in effective strategies, and expect the teacher to lead them by the hand at all times.

One particular problem directly connected with the Internationalization group might serve as a good example: I have been in a very similar situation several times when students of various levels of proficiency (including upper-intermediate) asked me how it is possible they do not use newly acquired language in fluency activities or simply when speaking freely; they complained of the obvious inefficiency of less controlled tasks, since these *do not push* them enough to use certain language, as other, more controlled activities do. Moreover, it is interesting to note that these complaints are also common with more communicative, eager students, even when an activity creates the need for the use of very specific language structure or vocabulary. In each of these situations, I have been forced to state very expressively and very authoritatively that at such a point it is unavoidable for the student to take control, that using pieces of language actively is a more effective strategy than memorizing long lists of the same against Czech equivalents. Provided this kind of guidance is repeated often enough, it seems to have surprisingly strong impact on student behaviour.

Experience has shown therefore that it is not enough to tell students once about the benefits of certain activities, strategies or behaviour and expect them to understand immediately, to remember and use these effectively in the future; a more comprehensive and systematic training is clearly needed. Wenden (1991) provides a thorough review of literature and practical research concerning training in effective learning strategies, and designs a detailed, systematic *action plan*, which can be adapted according to specific circumstances.

7 Conclusion

Being involved in the Masaryk University Internationalization project has been greatly beneficial in that it has given me valuable feedback on teaching methodology and stimulated my interest in learner beliefs and expectations. Although there has been no systematic learner training involved yet, I have managed to guide many of my students towards more successful learning strategies and behaviour. It is time, however, that all teachers were instructed in detail about the possibility and indeed necessity of learner training; that way, learning and teaching English can surely be much more enjoyable for both teachers and learners.

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