

LEARNING STRATEGIES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY IN DEVELOPING INTEGRATED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS: A HIGHER EDUCATION CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to show how increasing students' awareness of the various strategies for the development of integrated skills in English contributes to the enhancement of their autonomy in learning this foreign language. The paper uses quantitative data collected from 44 Romanian university students enrolled in the EFL course and aims to examine the correlation between the use of specific learning strategies and the practices that foster learner autonomy beyond the classroom. The article forms part of an ongoing Ph.D. research investigating learner autonomy development among higher education students in the context of English language acquisition.*

Key words: *EFL, higher education, integrated skills, learner autonomy, learning strategies*

1. Introduction

Being aware of one's most effective strategies when engaging in language tasks that require the integration of reading, listening, writing, and speaking serves as a stepping stone towards improving proficiency and autonomy in these areas. This awareness empowers learners to apply the most appropriate methods in order to increase their efficiency and take responsibility for their own language learning. Globally regarded as a "lingua franca" that serves as the primary means of communication among speakers of different native languages, the English language has become a prerequisite for cross-border interaction in both social and professional spheres. Given its multidimensional use in real-life contexts, the acquisition of the English language should exceed the boundaries of theoretical knowledge and be oriented towards experiential learning and authentic use. For students in tertiary education, English should represent more than an academic objective that is achieved through passing examinations. Instead, it should be viewed as a long-term pursuit that contributes to their future professional success. Therefore, due to its lifelong usefulness, the process of acquiring this foreign language extends well beyond the confines of institutionalised learning and the completion of formal education. In this context, it is necessary for students in higher education to "learn how to learn" and develop their autonomous learning behaviours by engaging in self-directed learning and transitioning from excessive reliance on the teacher's guidance within the classroom to independently using their own cognitive resources.

Parallel to the emphasis on learner autonomy is the widespread recognition of the importance of the integrated skill approach in the EFL classroom. For learners to produce authentic language that mirrors natural interactions, it is requisite for them to practise the skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking simultaneously, shifting their focus from isolated vocabulary and grammar drills to communicative activities that enable real-life language use in day-to-day experiences. The integrated skill approach develops students' communicative competence by providing a holistic understanding of the language and a more complex view of

it. The significance of integrated skills in English is globally recognised in international proficiency exams such as Cambridge English Qualifications, IELTS, and TOEFL, which are specifically structured around the integration of these four skills. This paper, therefore, aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between learner autonomy, strategy awareness, and integrated skills development. The primary research method adopted in this study was the questionnaire-based survey, which served as the main research instrument to collect quantitative data from my participants.

2. Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Acquisition

Based on the theoretical premise that learners achieve better outcomes when they set their own objectives and apply effective strategies, developing learner autonomy in language learning has become a central concern in education. The term “autonomy” was firstly introduced by Henri Holec (1981), who stated that autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec 1981:3), with the term “ability” being referred to as a “power or capacity to do something” (Holec 1981:3). Being an autonomous learner means taking responsibility for all the decisions regarding learning, by establishing learning objectives, determining the content and sequence of study, choosing effective strategies and techniques, monitor the learning process, and evaluating learning outcomes (Holec 1981:3). The types of methods and techniques available to learners fall into three main categories: those they are already familiar with from previous learning experiences, those they discover through interaction with other learners or learning materials, and those they design for themselves. He also notes that learners choose their methods based on two main criteria: efficacy and adaptability. Learners assess the effectiveness of certain learning methods based on how well they achieve their learning objectives, and adapt their techniques to fit factors such as time, place, materials, motivation, and patience (Holec 1981:14-15).

Building on Holec’s seminal work, Little (1991) argues that autonomy is a capacity which involves the development of “detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action” (Little 1991:4). He closely links the concept of autonomy to the learner’s psychological relationship with learning, stating that, at its most basic level, autonomy refers to the way the learner psychologically relates to the content and the process of learning, as well as to the transfer of knowledge to larger contexts. In standard terms, ‘autonomy’ entails a certain amount of independence and freedom from external control. However, this freedom is not total, as it is subject to certain conditions and limitations. Given the social nature of human beings, Little values “interdependence” over “independence” in autonomous learning (Little 1991:4-5).

Benson (2011) views autonomy as a key educational goal and underscores its role as a feature of one’s learning approach rather than a learning method. He defines the term as “the capacity to take control over one’s own learning” (Benson 2011:2), which – he believes – comes naturally and is accessible to all learners. He identifies autonomy as a multi-layered concept that encompasses technical, psychological, and political aspects of learning. In what its technical level is regarded, autonomy is focused on the “management, strategies, and techniques of learning” (Benson and Lor 1998:8). On the psychological level, it refers to the learner’s ability to be self-directed and self-regulated in learning. From a political perspective, autonomy implies that the learner is able to take control over situational contexts. Although some students may exhibit autonomy at one level and others at all levels, these levels are considered to be interconnected. Therefore, fully autonomous learners possess the technical and psychological resources that enable them to be self-directed and have control over the learning environment so that they make use of these abilities to the fullest (Benson and Lor 1998:8).

3. Language Learning Strategies

Rubin (1975) defined learning strategies as “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge” (Rubin 1975:43). In her seminal work, *What the ‘Good Language Learner’ Can Teach Us*, she identified a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioural strategies learners use when they are actively involved in their learning process. First, good language learners are willing and accurate guessers: they are able to guess meaning by effectively using the linguistic and contextual clues of the setting, demonstrating a high tolerance for ambiguity. Second, they have a strong drive to communicate, as well as learn from communication. To convey meaning, they use several techniques, such as circumlocution, paraphrasing, body language, etc. Third, they present low levels of inhibition or self-consciousness, being willing to take risks and learn from them. Fourth, good language learners also attend to linguistic form, consciously analysing, categorising, and synthesising language features and patterns. Fifth, they engage in regular practice both inside and outside the classroom and look for opportunities to use the language (such as making up sentences, going to the movies, initiating conversations, etc). Sixth, they monitor their own speech and that of others, meaning that they are highly aware of how their production of language is being understood and whether their performance aligns with the standards they have set. Finally, they attend to meaning, as they know that simply focusing on grammar is not enough to grasp the message. Instead, attention should also be paid to the communicative intent and social functions of the language (Rubin 1975:46-47).

Chamot et al. (1990) came with another classification of learning strategies, dividing them into three main categories: metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies refer to planning, progress tracking, evaluating one’s performance, and using those tools that help learners regulate their own learning. Cognitive strategies are used to accomplish language tasks by elaborating prior knowledge, and can include taking notes, deducing the meaning from context, paraphrasing, etc. Social and effective strategies entail interaction among learners, and involve the actions of cooperation, as well as asking questions for clarification (Chamot et al. 1990:16-17).

Oxford (2003) categorised learning strategies into two main classes: direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory-related, cognitive, and compensatory strategies, whereas indirect strategies contain metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Cognitive strategies allow learners to engage with the language material in direct ways, such as reasoning, analysing, taking notes, summarising, synthesising, outlining, as well as reorganising information to develop stronger knowledge structures. Metacognitive strategies, such as recognising one’s own learning style preferences and needs, planning for a second/foreign language task, collecting and organising resources, setting up a study area and schedule, keeping track of errors, and assessing the effectiveness of any learning strategy, are used to manage the overall learning process. Memory-related strategies help learners retrieve information by linking an item or concept with another, but they do not necessarily lead to deep comprehension. They usually include associating words with sounds, pictures, body movement, or flashcard use. Compensatory strategies help learners bridge knowledge gaps to continue the communication, and refer to guessing the meaning from context, using synonyms, or gestures. Affective strategies refer to regulating one’s emotional and nervous system through positive self-talk, deep breathing, identifying feelings of anxiety, and rewarding oneself after successfully accomplishing a learning task. Social strategies are used in various social interactions and include asking questions for clarification, asking for assistance when solving certain language tasks, having conversations with native speakers, as well as learning about cultural and social norms. (Oxford 2003:12-14).

4. On Language Skills

According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), language skills are defined as “the mode or manner in which language is used” (Richards and Schmidt 2010:322). The four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) are divided into two categories: receptive skills and productive skills. Receptive skills include reading and listening, while productive skills encompass speaking and writing. In order for students to develop communicative competence, language skills should not be practised in isolation, as the segregated-skill instruction does not ensure the authentic use of language (Oxford 2001:21). Instead, language skills should be intertwined within instruction and be simultaneously practised. As Hinkel (2006) highlights, “in meaningful communication, people employ incremental language skills not in isolation, but in tandem” (Hinkel 2006:113). Harmer (2015) also expands on the multi-layered nature of skill use. For instance, when learners engage in a conversation, they not only activate their speaking skills but also use their listening skills, because, in order to answer, one must first listen. Reading, even though frequently regarded as an isolated activity, often involves note-taking, conversation, and comment. With regard to writing, since much of today’s modern communication occurs in a digital setting, such as texting, individuals first read the message and then answer in writing (Harmer 2015:297).

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

A total of 44 higher education students from the Physics Department at the West University of Timișoara voluntarily participated in the study. They consisted of 21 females and 22 males, and 1 participant who did not report their gender, with the vast majority aged 18-22 years, from two different years of study, i.e., year 1 and year 2.

5.2. Research Instruments and Data Collection

This research was based on a survey conducted among Romanian university students of the Faculty of Physics, who attended the practical course of English as a Foreign Language. The data collection was done through a questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions, where participants selected the option that best matched their views. An “other” option was also available, allowing participants to write an answer that was not included among the provided choices.

5.3. The Survey – A Quantitative Analysis

The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify and analyse students’ most employed strategies to improve the integrated skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing in learning English as a foreign language, while also focusing on the relationship between the use of these strategies and the development of autonomy in language learning. Prior to distributing the questionnaire to the students, the participants were informed about the aim of the study, highlighting that their participation and answering all questions were voluntary. They were also encouraged to be honest, so that the results of the study would be veridical and would provide a deeper understanding of how learners use language learning strategies to enhance autonomy in foreign language acquisition. The findings of the study are presented and interpreted below.

As graphically presented, the first question of the survey had a demographic dimension:

What is your gender?
44 de răspunsuri

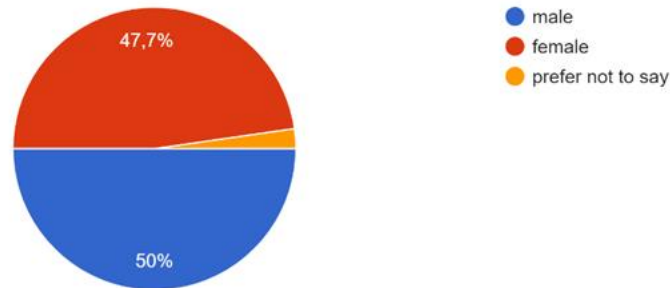


Figure 1 – Gender distribution of respondents

A total of 44 participants answered the first question of the survey regarding their gender. Half of the respondents (50%) identified as male, and 47.7% identified as female. One participant (2%) preferred not to disclose their gender. This balanced distribution suggests that the study comprises the perspectives of both men and women in almost equal proportions.

What is your age group?
44 de răspunsuri

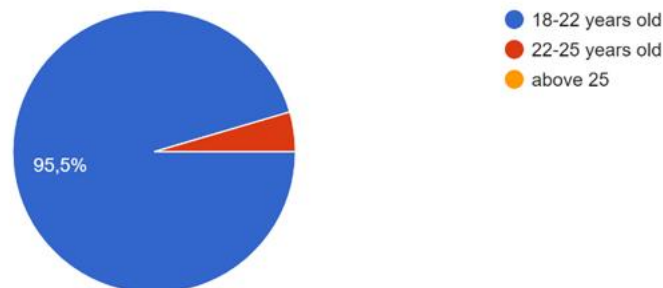


Figure 2 – Age distribution of respondents

Out of 44 respondents, 42 of them (95.5%) are aged between 18 and 22 years old, with only 2 participants (4.5%) choosing the 22-25 age group. This suggests that the study was conducted on participants whose cognitive abilities were still actively used, with a high frequency of study activities.

What is your nationality?

44 de răspunsuri

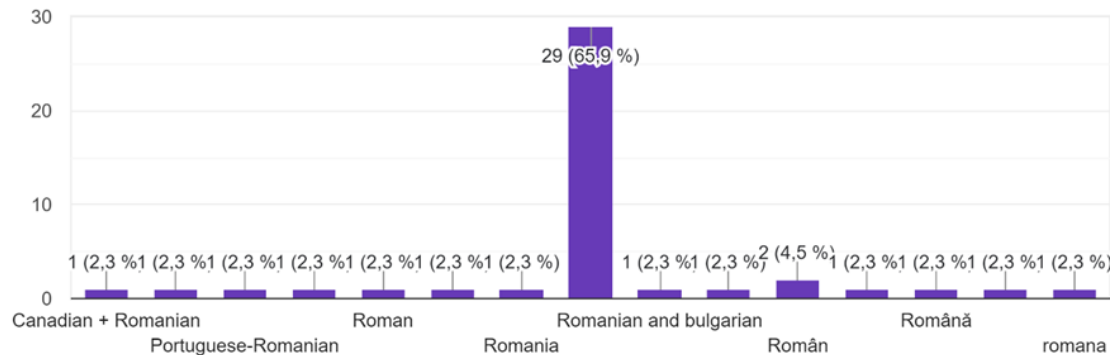


Figure 3 – Nationality distribution of respondents

The nationality of most respondents is Romanian, with a few exceptions of students with dual nationality: Canadian-Romanian, Portuguese-Romanian, and Romanian-Bulgarian.

What year of study are you in?

44 de răspunsuri

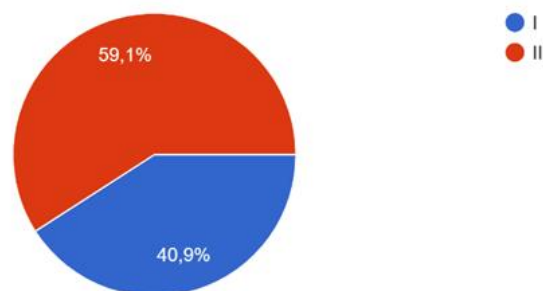


Figure 4 – Year of study of respondents

26 of the participants, which represents more than half of the total number of respondents (59.1%), are in the second year of the study, while 18 of them (40.9%) are in the first.

What is your field of study?

44 de răspunsuri

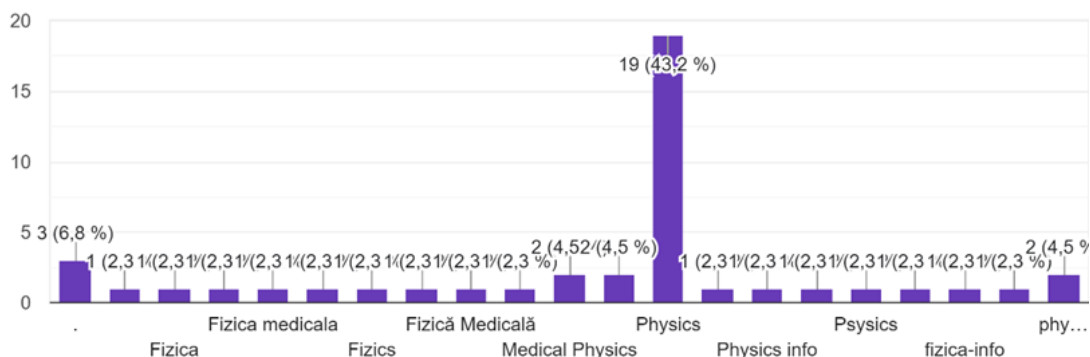


Figure 5 – Field of study of respondents

As previously mentioned above, all the survey participants are Physics students enrolled in different programmes, including General Physics, Medical Physics, and Computational Physics.

The results of the core questions are discussed below.

The next question is a closed-ended one and has the purpose of uncovering the skills students need to improve the most in English:

What skill do you need to improve the most in English?

44 de răspunsuri

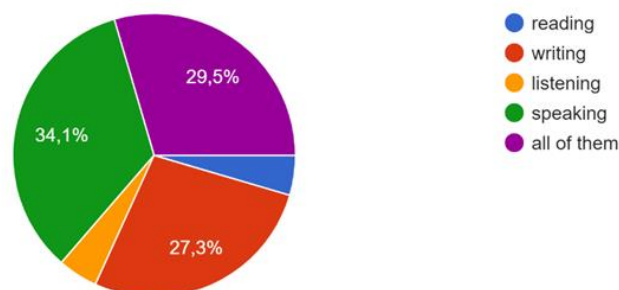


Figure 6 – Skills students need to improve the most in English

In relation to autonomous learning, however, the aim of the question is far more complex. Making students become aware of the English skills they do not excel at is a crucial point in pinpointing the areas that require improvement and taking proactive steps to optimise those specific skills. If a learner realises and acknowledges which skills they struggle with or face challenges with, they will become more self-reflective and aware of the skills that need improvement, which increases the likelihood that they will engage in additional practice in those areas. As can be seen from the above pie chart, the skill that most of the students (34.1%) think they need to improve the most in English is speaking. As an integrated skill, speaking is a productive skill, as learners are required to generate language rather than only understand it. The production of language is more challenging than the understanding of it, since, in order to

generate linguistic content, one needs to possess a solid foundation of linguistic knowledge. In speaking, the learner needs to turn their thoughts into words on the spot, making the transition from an abstract level to a verbal one. This means that the speaker is required to have a strong command of vocabulary in English to express their thoughts verbally in a fluent, articulate, and natural manner. In order for students to gain the ease to effortlessly express themselves in English, the skill of speaking should be practised extensively. Their lack of confidence in their speaking abilities is understandable in the context of English as a foreign language in the Romanian school, as little emphasis is put on this skill in the traditional classroom. In the formal school environment, the main focus is placed more on covering the material in the course textbooks, which usually gives more attention to exercises that include the practice of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. Due to the complexity of such exercises and the amount of effort done by the teacher to make sure the students understand the most difficult content, speaking tends to be overlooked many times. Moreover, another logistical reason for which speaking is not exercised and evaluated so thoroughly is that it requires more time for the assessment of all students. Even though coursebooks provide a wide range of speaking activities such as role-play, picture descriptions, or interviews, they are usually assigned as a short pair-work exercise, whose performance involves a dual challenge. On one hand, if these speaking tasks are meticulously performed by the students, they also require a thorough evaluation from the teacher, as well as in-depth feedback. The disadvantage of this approach lies in the insufficient time for listening to and assessing each pair's performance, resulting in a disparity among students, as some of them have the opportunity to improve their speaking skills, while others do not. In order for students to reach a level of fluency in speaking, it is necessary for them to have consistent practice, which, within a traditional classroom setting, might be hard to achieve.

The next 29.5% of the respondents feel that they need to develop all their English skills, while 27.3% of them think that the skill that specifically needs improvement is writing. Similar to speaking, writing is also a productive skill that particularly focuses on the production of language, a fact that requires a more advanced level of proficiency than only understanding the language. The reason why students also struggle with the production of language in writing is almost the same as in the case of speaking. Assigning writing tasks during English classes can be very effective but also very time-consuming, as it requires much time and effort on the part of the learner. Therefore, this is not an activity that could be practised consistently, such as during every English class, because it requires a significant amount of time, and there will remain very little time for the teaching process itself. This issue could have been easily solved with the option of giving writing tasks as homework, but the teacher has no guarantee that the homework has been completed by the student themselves. As expected, the least selected answers were the ones that involve the comprehension of language, namely, reading (4.5%) and listening (4.5%) – receptive skills, meaning that the learners find it easier to understand the language rather than produce it.

After identifying the integrated skills that students face more challenges in, the next step is to address the issue by employing strategies that can enhance students' performance in those areas. Even though only two of the questionnaire respondents said that they struggle the most with reading, the purpose of the next question is to make students aware of which is the best approach employed to bolster this skill:

What is the most effective learning strategy for developing reading skills? Choose one answer by clicking the corresponding item:
44 de răspunsuri



Figure 7 – Strategies for developing reading skills

As expected, the most efficient way in order to improve one's reading skills is through the actual activity of "reading books, articles, newspapers etc.", answer which has been selected by 63.6% of the participants. This strategy falls under the "cognitive" category, involving the direct processing and understanding of language input. Reading a variety of texts to understand English more extensively and reach a proficient level of reading comprehension is undoubtedly effective, but students need to make a distinction between texts that contain accurate language as well as a wide range of terms that facilitate language acquisition, and texts than contain slang language and incorrect usage of the language which does not serve as a valuable reading material. In order to learn the English language properly and acquire correct spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, it is necessary for the learner to select reading materials that are suitable for proper learning, including both fiction as well as technical texts.

The next 18.2 % of the questionnaire participants said that their most effective strategy for developing reading skills is "reading out loud", which could be very productive, especially for improving pronunciation in English. However, this strategy is only applicable to texts of a manageable length, as it may no longer be a viable approach for longer reading materials that cannot be entirely read out loud. The next two chosen options were "keeping a vocabulary journal" (9.1%), which serves as a memory-related strategy through which students store new terms, and "doing reading comprehension exercises" (9.1%), whose main function is cognitive. In what the first choice is regarded, keeping a vocabulary journal would be very productive for developing not only reading skills but also other integrated skills and learner autonomy, as this approach fosters an intimate relationship between the learner and the process of learning. Keeping a vocabulary journal refers to the activity of writing down unknown words, phrasal verbs, or idiomatic phrases that the learner discovers through the process of reading. In this way, the learner keeps track of all these lexical items, having the possibility to constantly revise their meaning and improve their vocabulary. In what the "doing reading comprehension exercises" strategy is concerned, this is especially beneficial for in-depth understanding of texts. Therefore, the learner goes beyond the scanning and skimming stages by reading a text in great detail in order to answer specific comprehension questions. However, reading comprehension questions usually focus on specific sections of a text, covering a limited part of the given reading material. As reading comprehension exercises could not encompass all the details included in the text, students may have a tendency to overlook the parts of the text that are not included in the questions, which might lead to certain vocabulary items being missed or not assimilated. As can be seen from the above pie chart, the option of "summarising" has not been chosen by any of the questionnaire respondents.

The purpose of the next question is to identify students' most productive strategy for enhancing their writing skills:

What is the most effective learning strategy for developing writing skills? Choose one answer by clicking the corresponding item:

44 de răspunsuri

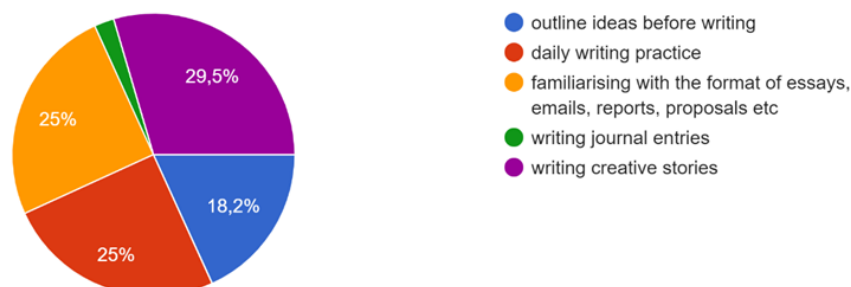


Figure 8 – Strategies for developing writing skills

The answer that has been selected the most by the questionnaire participants (29.5%) was “writing creative stories”, which underscores students’ preference for unleashing their imagination and free expression of ideas. Creative writing is more appealing to learners because they do not feel confined by any writing limitations. Therefore, they give free rein to their imagination, as their writing itself follows the flow of their ideas naturally, without being interrupted. Moreover, creative writing could cultivate a higher level of autonomy compared to other writing tasks because the learner establishes a closer and stronger relationship with their text. As the content of creative writing is original and personalised according to each learner’s artistic vision, a deeper commitment is fostered between the learner and the learning process. The learner develops a stronger sense of ownership for their work and produces a piece of writing that is original by putting more interest in the production of this task. However, even though in the context of English language acquisition, creative writing is an effective strategy for improving fluency, vocabulary, and syntax, it could also be a limiting one and have its downsides. For instance, the lack of structure and topic requirements could lead to a capping of language development, as students are not challenged to step outside their comfort zone. When assigning students the task of writing creative stories, the teacher does not ask them to follow specific guidelines or incorporate certain language structures, idiomatic expressions, and so on. Therefore, students may rely on their existing vocabulary and not make any substantial language progress.

The next two options have been selected by 25% of the questionnaire respondents. These are “daily writing practice” and “familiarising with the format of essays, emails, reports, proposals, etc”. As with the development of any other skill, daily practice is crucial. In the case of writing as an integrated skill, an autonomous learner could engage in writing a text of any length every day and then seek feedback from their teacher. By maintaining this writing discipline, the ease of word flow will be stimulated and improved, along with the student’s sense of syntax and vocabulary usage. However, daily writing practice should consist of writing tasks that demand grammar, spelling, and punctuation accuracy. Otherwise, if a student is engaging in superficial writing activities such as chatting online with friends or writing texts where there is a complete disregard for language accuracy, this practice may prove to be ineffective. The next strategy, which refers to “familiarising with the format of essays, emails, reports, proposals”, is both useful and necessary. The usefulness of this practice lies in the expansion of the learner’s vocabulary, as these types of formal pieces of writing demand the

use of a certain type of language that the learner may not be accustomed to using. In order to successfully write these types of texts, the learner must follow a certain structure and employ some fixed expressions and recommended words and phrases. Moreover, the necessity to familiarise oneself with the format of these writing pieces has a practical foundation, as mastering the structure of texts such as reports, proposals, or letters is mandatory for passing international proficiency exams.

The next writing strategy selected by 18.2% of the questionnaire respondents was to “outline ideas before writing”. The type of this learning strategy has a metacognitive nature, as it involves planning and organising ideas *before* the learning takes place. Taking this initial step prior to the actual activity of writing is very beneficial for identifying the main ideas that the learner wants to convey in their text, as many times the mind is overcrowded with a mix of ideas, some of which are useful and some of which are redundant. In order to identify only the important ideas that will be later developed throughout the text, it is recommended for the learner to initially have a brainstorming activity through which all their ideas, notions, and views that come to their mind are written down. In this way, the learner has a clear overview of all their ideas and has a better perspective to select the ones that are truly noteworthy. The option which has been selected by only one of the questionnaire participants was “writing journal entries”, selected by only one student (2.3%). Even though not very used, this approach could be very effective because it ensures daily writing practice. Moreover, since journals consist of a personal reflection of one’s intimate thoughts, the individual does not perceive this activity as a learning task but as an opportunity for emotion regulation, self-reflection, and stress relief. Therefore, this stands as an affective strategy.

Following the same pattern, the next question aims to discover students’ more effective strategies for developing their listening skills:

What is the most effective learning strategy for developing listening skills? Choose one answer by clicking the corresponding item:

44 de răspunsuri

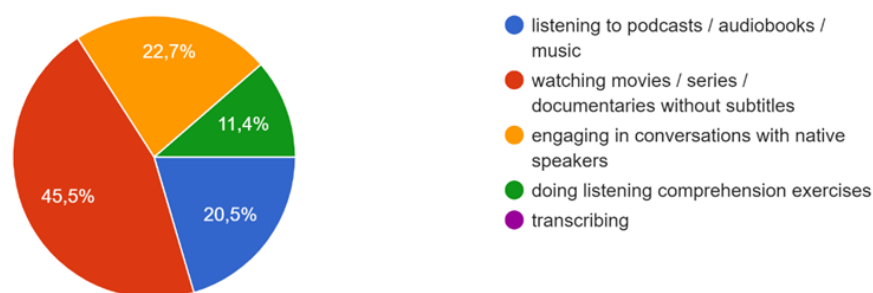


Figure 9 – Strategies for developing listening skills

As can be seen, most of the respondents (45.5%) selected the “watching movies/series/documentaries without subtitles” strategy. This strategy involves a double function of the brain, as it is both a cognitive and compensatory strategy, when certain words are unknown and they have to guess the meaning from the context given, relying on visuals or gestures. Watching movies and TV series without subtitles constitutes a very strong catalyst in improving listening skills, as they solely rely on their listening comprehension abilities in successfully understanding different accents or grasping the meaning of one’s speech at different speeds. The next 22.7% of the respondents opted for the “engaging in conversations with native speakers” choice, which primarily is a social strategy that helps the learner train the

ear to be more familiar with the language spoken at conversational speed, understand various accents, and enhance pronunciation, while also getting familiarised with the day-to-day spoken language. The next 20.5% of the participants said that they best train their listening skills while “listening to podcasts/audiobooks/music”. Listening to podcasts in English language learning presents the same advantages as watching movies/documentaries, as it engages the auditory sense and offers exposure to language in real-life contexts.

Moreover, one particular characteristic of actively listening to podcasts as a language development method is that podcasts can be accessed anytime, so learners can listen to them while also doing other activities. In what listening to music is regarded, the advantage that is associated with learning a foreign language through songs stems from the musicality aspect, which enables a faster and more effective learning process. The rhyme and rhythm of song lyrics help the learner effortlessly remember certain linguistic structures, which are then retained in their brain. The explanation why certain song words or idiomatic phrases are recalled more easily compared to non-musical contexts aligns with the repetitive nature of song lyrics and the brain’s process of retaining information, which makes use of auditory and rhythmic cues for enriched and improved learning outcomes. However, apart from the obvious benefits that learning English through music involves, which also include contextual learning, fluency and pronunciation improvement, and overall listening skills development, there is also a flipside to the coin. The songs students listen to may potentially consist of incorrect usage of grammar structures, which could also lead to the development of incorrect learning habits that are difficult to rectify in the future.

The last 11.4% said that their most productive method for enhancing listening skills is “doing listening comprehension exercises”. Apart from the obvious advantages which are encompassed by all the other presented strategies, the activity of doing listening comprehension exercises provides one benefit in addition to the other strategies. This refers to the active listening for a specific purpose, by focusing on key information in order to answer the questions of the exercise correctly. Unlike engaging in listening to certain audio-video materials for pleasure, listening for a specific purpose heightens students’ focus because the listening is active, not passive. When listening purely for enjoyment, due to compensatory strategies, students frequently grasp the meaning of certain unfamiliar words or phrases by deriving them from the context of the overall message conveyed. As a result, when a learner understands the overall message from the context while listening for pleasure, they may not feel the necessity to search the meaning of unfamiliar words in the dictionary, which can lead to missing out on certain lexical items. Conversely, when a learner engages in doing listening comprehension exercises, they cannot solely rely on the context to understand all the words in detail and solve the exercises correctly. Instead, when encountering an unknown lexical item, the learner is compelled to discover the meaning of the word in order to answer the question of the exercise correctly, which serves as an aid for vocabulary expansion. Finally, the option of “transcribing” has not been chosen by any of the respondents involved in the questionnaire, which is understandable since this process is typically used by students who are pursuing Translation Studies or Journalism, and the students involved in the present questionnaire may not be familiar with these previously mentioned fields. However, this strategy is particularly useful in the context of developing listening skills because it encourages active listening on a much higher level, as the individual is required to pay close attention to every word uttered by the speaker.

The next question aims to discover which is the most efficient strategy students employ to develop their speaking skills:

What is the most effective learning strategy for developing speaking skills? Choose one answer by clicking the corresponding item:

44 de răspunsuri



Figure 10 – Strategies for developing speaking skills

Three-quarters of the survey participants said that their most preferred method for developing speaking skills is by “engaging in conversations with peers / native speakers”, which also falls under the category of social strategies. Even though this activity does not occur in a planned and organised manner, as it is rather spontaneous in nature, its effects are indeed helpful in terms of achieving proficiency in spoken English. When engaging in a conversation with an English-speaking peer or a native speaker, a double transfer of information occurs, benefiting both parties. During a conversation, participants take on the role of both speaker and listener, alternating between speaking and listening. As a speaker, the learner improves their English skills by learning to speak more fluently, making faster syntactic and lexical connections, unleashing their verbal flow, and refining their pronunciation. As a listener, the learner is introduced to the language world of the speaker, since the speaker chooses the topic of discussion. The linguistic benefit here is that, depending on the topic selected by the speaker, the listener has the opportunity to discover new vocabulary that will also be used during their verbal interaction, when the listener takes on the role of the speaker. As opposed to having a conversation in English with a peer who is not a native speaker, engaging with native speakers raises the discussion to a more advanced level of language use, as the words, idiomatic expressions, and phrasal verbs employed help the non-native listener gain more knowledge. In relation to the autonomous learning approach, this strategy enables the independent practice of the English language by the learners, because, while they are engaged in a dialogue, they are relying on their personal linguistic resources. Moreover, during these kinds of interactions, the learners are practising and subsequently developing their speaking skills during real-time conversations, which also challenge them to provide instant and spontaneous answers.

The next 13.6% of the questionnaire participants consider that their most effective learning strategy for developing speaking skills is by “imitating native speakers’ pronunciation, intonation and accent”. This strategy is particularly important for the correct acquisition of the spoken language, as pronunciation and accent play a pivotal role in how a non-native speaker’s language is audibly perceived by their listeners. For instance, even if a learner has a strong command of vocabulary and grammar, poor pronunciation and accent, as well as the mispronunciation of certain words, can negatively impact their overall performance as a speaker. However, this stage of foreign language acquisition in developing the skill of speaking is often among the final ones, as it is more a process of language refinement rather than actual learning. Typically, before focusing on pronunciation, learners usually prioritise vocabulary and

grammar, as these are the most challenging parts of any language. Only after reaching a certain level of proficiency in these areas will the learner turn their attention to refining the details of their speech.

The next two speaking strategies, “learning certain structures/phrases/words by heart” and “preparing speeches/presentations”, were selected with equal frequency, with 4.5% of the questionnaire respondents opting for each. Delivering speeches or giving presentations on certain topics in English is a very practical, multidimensional learning approach that develops skills such as creativity, research, body language, pronunciation, fluency, and overcoming stage fright. The autonomous component of this approach lies in the responsibility students take when making independent decisions concerning the structure, layout, content, and language used in the presentation. The memory-related strategy of learning certain language structures by heart in the context of enhancing speaking skills can prove to be necessary and effective in some scenarios, such as learning idiomatic phrases, collocations, phrasal verbs, and words that require a certain preposition. As these structures are inflexible, any deviation from the correct word, verb, or preposition will result in a grammatical mistake.

The strategy selected the least by the students, with only one respondent (2.3%) opting for it, was “recording yourself”, a metacognitive strategy which involves identifying mistakes and tracking progress. Even though not highly practised, recording oneself in the process of bolstering speaking skills, especially pronunciation and accent, could be very advantageous. Within this approach, the learner serves as both a student and a teacher, as they are able to identify the language errors made during the recording and actively work towards correcting them. In contrast to writing, which is also a productive skill, speaking does not provide a tangible record of one’s performance. Therefore, it is very difficult for the learner to identify language mistakes in their discourse on their own without receiving external feedback, because it is nearly impossible to recall all the words spoken during a verbal exchange. At the same time, especially in what pronunciation is concerned, the learner does not properly or actively listen to themselves while they are speaking, and cannot be aware of how they pronounce certain words and how their spoken language sounds overall. Hence, recording yourself could be very useful in this situation, as the learner could listen to the recording of their speech and assess it objectively. Moreover, in terms of autonomy, this strategy fosters autonomous learning on a much higher level because the learner is the one who is in full control of both performing the task as well as evaluating it, which provides a double advantage to this approach.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, increasing students’ awareness of consciously using strategies when learning a foreign language – an activity whose effectiveness varies according to individual learning styles – helps them build autonomy, as they become self-directed learners who can take responsibility for their own learning. In this way, English language learning extends beyond the limitations of the traditional classroom, as learners are fully capable of strengthening and continuing this process outside the academic institution. However, as the teacher’s role remains essential in students’ learning endeavours, the purpose of my study is not to show that students should operate in isolation, since this is not the aim of learner autonomy. Instead, it seeks to highlight how teachers can direct students in selecting and becoming aware of the methods that yield the best outcomes and facilitate independent learning under the teacher’s guidance.

The results show that the most challenging integrated skills for students are speaking and writing, both of which require a higher degree of autonomy in order for learners to develop the communicative competencies that allow them to produce language independently and with ease. However, in the era of AI, individuals’ cognitive ability to write original content

independently is increasingly hindered, posing a threat to the development of learners' writing skills and critical thinking. This underscores the need for more sustained practice within the classroom. The most employed learning strategies selected by the learners were the following: reading books/articles/newspapers in English; writing creative stories; watching movies/series/documentaries in English without subtitles; and engaging in conversations with native speakers, showing that they have a higher preference for cognitive, compensatory, and social strategies. All these strategies indicate that students engage in activities they genuinely like and spark their curiosity, showing that intrinsic motivation also serves as a key factor in fostering autonomous behaviours in learning. Also, their options show that the process of learning English can also be done independently, as all the strategies used by them presuppose engaging in activities that facilitate learning outside the classroom. At the other end of the spectrum, the least chosen strategies were: doing reading/listening comprehension exercises, keeping a vocabulary journal, writing journal entries, or recording oneself. These results indicate that the typical comprehension exercises done in class may be perceived as tedious by students, and, despite their pedagogical value and necessity, they do not arouse learners' interest. Therefore, they may prove ineffective in the long run, unless combined with more entertaining or motivating strategies. This study can serve as a starting point for further discussions on learner autonomy and learning strategies for developing integrated skills in learning English as a foreign language. I am also aware that the findings of this study cannot be considered representative or generalizable, and more quantitative research is required, doubled by qualitative methods.

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