

REVIEW

by Associate Professor Sylvia Atanasova Velikova, PhD

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The dissertation submitted by the doctoral student Gabriela Brane Nedelkoska focuses on *Vocabulary learning strategies used by university students in an ESP context*. The research has been conducted under the supervision of Associate Professor Svetlana Georgieva Dimitrova-Guzeleva, PhD, New Bulgarian University.

Significance of the research problem

The topic of the dissertation, dedicated to the acquisition of vocabulary and the development strategic competence in foreign language learning, is not new, but it is of indisputable importance. The significance of this issue is convincingly justified by the author in the introduction of the dissertation. The research problem is contextualized in the light of the common view of scholars and practitioners in the field of language acquisition and foreign language learning on the central role of lexical knowledge in achieving an adequate level of communicative competence and academic results (p. 5). The practical relevance of the study corresponds to the complex variety factors (e.g., age, gender, personality type, language learning context, learning styles and strategies) that influence vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, these variables should not be underestimated, but should be understood as a starting point for useful methodological decisions in language teaching. Last but not least, the dissertation topic formulated in this way, connects the building and enrichment of lexical knowledge in foreign language learning with vocabulary learning strategies as part of learners' general strategic and communicative competence (see, for example, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 2001). The central role of learning strategies for facilitating learner autonomy, agency and self-awareness should also be taken into account. In the introduction, the Candidate observes that the multi-dimensional study of

vocabulary learning strategies has so far remained outside the active attention of scholars since much of the research in the field has focused on a limited number of strategies or on isolated factors that influence them (p. 8). Therefore, the author sets herself the ambitious goal of filling this research gap.

Aims and objectives of the dissertation

The dissertation has a well-balanced structure. The study comprises 247 pages and consists of an introduction, three parts (the literature review and the two parts devoted to the empirical research), conclusion, bibliography and appendices. In the introductory part, the overall aim of the research, the research questions and the working hypotheses are clearly stated. They refer to the key variables – vocabulary acquisition strategies used by 296 Macedonian students studying English at the American University of Europe-FON, North Macedonia. The investigation aims to examine if and how learners' individual differences determine their choice of vocabulary learning strategies, as well as the effect of the choice of strategies on their vocabulary size. The research questions and hypotheses are adequately derived from the aims of the study. More specifically, the study aims to verify empirically: 1) the impact of students' individual characteristics (gender, language configuration, level of language training, learning styles, personality type, beliefs about vocabulary learning) on their choice of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS); 2) the correlation between the choice and the use of different VLS and the size of the acquired vocabulary; 3) the influence of the context (learning English for specific purposes or learning general English) and the choice of VLS. Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska has successfully selected research methods that correspond to the purpose and nature of the study. She skillfully combines quantitative and qualitative data collection methods and tests the working hypotheses through various statistical procedures and through the use of verbal self-reports (surveys), interviews, and lexical tests as research instruments.

Familiarity with the topic and literature review

In the second part of the dissertation, the author demonstrates in-depth knowledge of the research topic. In the review of literature, she systematically and analytically presents the theoretical parameters of study and operationalizes the key variables. Gabriela Nedelkoska discusses key concepts and theories on the nature of lexical knowledge in both first and second

language acquisition (Graves, 1987; Read, 1993; McCarthy and Carter, 1994; Chapelle, 1998; Nation 2005). In addition, the Candidate analyzes the dichotomy “active-passive” vocabulary according to Nation (2001). The issue of developing learner strategic competence is also presented in the light of the development of declarative and procedural knowledge. In this part, Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska draws on DeKeyser’s Skill Acquisition Theory, which explains the stages of second language acquisition (with relevance to foreign language vocabulary, in particular). These stages encompass the processes from the acquisition of declarative knowledge and the proceduralization of that knowledge to the point of automatization. In the last stage (automatization), language processing is stable and not hampered by working memory capacity. In addition, quite reasonably, the author clarifies that even highly automatized speech behavior is not completely automatic and does not happen flawlessly (p. 20).

In her review of previous research, Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska discusses the nature of vocabulary acquisition through the ideas of two paradigms – as social interaction and in the cognitive perspective according to Schmidt (1990) and Huitt (2009). In her research, the Candidate adopts the second point of view, according to which linguistic information is perceived, stored, retrieved and used through repeated interaction of learners with it. Moreover, only learners’ exposure to speech is not enough for learning a given lexical item. Learner cognitive resources should be activated. Their perceptions of the salience and meaningfulness of the lexical item is also important.

In order to contextualize her research within the field of language teaching and learning, Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska, also provides a review of influential methods and approaches in language teaching. In her discussion, she examines the ways in which they introduce, practice, reinforce and enrich learner vocabulary. The review focuses on some traditional methods (e.g., the grammar-translation method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method); cognitive developments (e.g., *Cognitive-code learning theory*), bringing to the fore the mental processes in language acquisition; the communicative approach; humanistic methods (including Suggestopedia); cooperative learning and task-based learning approaches.

The adopted focus of Ms. Nedelkoska’s research on the cognitive dimension of language acquisition also determines her decision to clarify the different types of memory stores (sensory memory, short-term memory, long-term memory, and working memory), since it has been established that memory capacity is a key variable determining the acquisition lexical knowledge.

The author adopts the following definition of memory for the purposes of her study: “mental processes of acquiring and retaining information for later retrieval, and the mental storage system that enables these processes” (p. 29).

The Candidate also examines some current neurolinguistic theories, drawing on the Neurolinguistic Approach (NLA) (Netten & Germain, 2012) in second/foreign language acquisition, in an attempt to shed light on the neurological foundations of bilingualism and multilingualism as a complex phenomenon, directly influenced by learner individual characteristics. Ms. Nedelkoska’s critical stance when discussing the literature in the field is also evident. She takes into account both the shortcomings and the contradictions of some theoretical statements, as well as their potential importance to her research. For example, the author comments on the attacks against the relevance of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and its “questionable” research methodology. At the same time, she convincingly refers to documented opinions about the usefulness of NLP in establishing a positive relationship between the teacher and the students, which, in turn, becomes a key factor in increasing learners’ motivation and their strategic and communicative competence (pp. 38–39).

In the second part of her dissertation, Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska synthesizes ideas in the field of language learning strategies and formulates her own definition of the concept as follows: “The strategies can be defined as mental activities, chosen by the learner, which govern the language acquisition process (Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992; Cohen, 2005; Griffiths 2008), and as such they can be viewed in relation to the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing (Oxford, 1990)” (p. 41).

Summarizing the views of O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Catalán (2003) and Rubin (1987) on vocabulary learning strategies, the Candidate narrows down the more general definition and defines VLS as “thoughts or behaviors learners undertake in order to understand, acquire and also retain new information”, “steps that learners take to learn the vocabulary and its meaning, place it in long-term memory, evoke it when needed, as well as use it in both oral and written production”, “processes by which the information is acquired, stored, recalled and used” (p. 43). The author examines various classifications of vocabulary learning strategies. For the purposes of her study, she adopts the classification proposed by Schmitt (1997), which broadly divides strategies into two groups: discovery and consolidation. The first ones are applied during the initial contact with the lexical unit (determination and social strategies), and the consolidation strategies (cognitive,

metacognitive, memory, and social strategies) are implemented at the subsequent stages of interaction with it.

Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska also consistently and purposefully introduces and operationalizes the main constructs around which the empirical research is structured; i.e., age, gender, language configuration, language proficiency, learning style, personality type, personal vocabulary learning beliefs, language learning context (English for specific purposes or general English).

The review of the relevant literature in the field is clearly the result of the Candidate's large-scale and solid investigative bibliographic work. In this part of the dissertation, Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska demonstrates her skills to select, synthesize, summarize and analyze a wide range of theoretical viewpoints, research models and results, and practical developments. Thus, she also introduces and clarifies the key terminology used in the study and builds the theoretical framework that underpins her research.

Referencing and citing

For the purposes of her research, Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska appropriately refers to a large number of authors – the reference list contains 361 titles. The most significant studies in the field, published over a wide time range, are included in the bibliography.

Research methodology

The research methodology corresponds to the stated goals, research questions and hypotheses of the dissertation. The overall empirical study was conducted among 296 undergraduate English language learners. Data on the factors (gender, language configuration, language learning context, learning styles, personality types, personal vocabulary learning beliefs) that influence the choice of strategies were obtained through surveys. Most of the self-report instruments are already developed, widely used and validated tools applied in similar studies around the world – e.g., Felder-Soloman's Index of Learning Styles questionnaire and the HEXACO Personality Inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2001, 2007). Through a survey based on Schmitt's (1997) classification and developed by Easterbrook (2013), the types of strategies chosen by the research participants are also identified.

The level of English proficiency and the participants' vocabulary size are established through tests. The first test is designed specifically for the purposes of the study, while learner

vocabulary size is tested through the Vocabulary Size Test 14000 (Nation and Beglar, 2007). The effectiveness of each vocabulary learning strategy type has also been examined experimentally, with the aim to establish learner awareness of the different types of strategies and whether the application of new strategies will lead to increased lexical knowledge.

Data collection and analysis

The impressive amount of collected empirical data is appropriately analyzed by means of descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA), *t* test, correlation analysis. Qualitative data analysis is also employed.

Contributions of the study

A significant contribution of the dissertation to the scholarly knowledge and research in the field of vocabulary learning strategies is the extensive literature review of the study. The obtained and diligently analyzed results of the experimental tests are also of contributing importance. The confirmed working hypothesis on the influence of the individual characteristics of the students on their strategic preferences is a contribution of theoretical and applied validity. This result argues for the need to raise the awareness not only of language teachers about the benefits of strategy-based language instruction, but also of learners about “the importance of self-reflection and active participation in the learning process” (p. 135). Moreover, the analysis of the collected data convincingly reveals a strong positive and statistically significant correlation between strategy use and learner vocabulary size. Also, the finding indicating statistically significant differences between the two groups of students (ESP and EGP learners) in their strategy preferences and their use provides interesting ideas for future research. Last but not least, the methodological intervention based on the strategy-oriented pedagogical approach – as part of the conducted experiment – offers an original component of foreign language learning in an academic environment.

The extended summary of the study (79 pages in all) accurately reflects the content of the dissertation. I would recommend that the achieved research contributions be more clearly highlighted both in the dissertation and in the summary.

Impact of the dissertation on the external environment

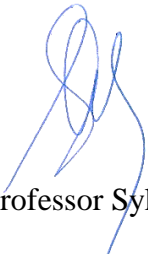
The Candidate has submitted 7 publications on the topic of the dissertation: 4 articles, 1 conference report, and 2 book chapters. Three of the presented publications are forthcoming (1 accepted for publication in an NBU volume, written confirmations of acceptance by the editor have been submitted for the other 2 publications). Four of the titles are co-authored. The submitted publications contain the main contributions of the dissertation shared with the wider community of researchers. Ms. Gabriela Nedelkoska has also participated as speaker in national and international conferences.

Conclusion

Considering all of the above, and especially the merits of the reviewed dissertation, which reveal the in-depth theoretical knowledge of the Candidate and her ability to carry out independent academic research, I recommend that **Gabriela Brane Nedelkoska** be awarded doctoral degree in the professional area 1.3. *Pedagogy of teaching ...*, subject field *Methodology of English Language Teaching*.

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Veliko Tarnovo



(Associate Professor Sylvia Velikova, PhD)