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Psycholinguistic study of personal approach of EFL students to learning English topical vocabulary

The paper presents research carried out with 606 students from 18 countries in Europe, Asia and Africa concerning their approach to learning vocabulary related to clothes and sport. The basic premise relates to the concept of a masterpiece, i.e. a personalised arrangement of language components across and within topics. The results show respondents to value practices supporting their improvement in familiarity with words and expressions, correct uses of language and fluency, but strongly disregard language-learning behaviours aimed at their orientation in the structural aspects of topics (such as divisions into topical subcategories, combinations with other topics, etc.).

Keywords: *personal approach to language, composing your own English, masterpiece, English vocabulary, second language learning.*

Психо-лингвистический анализ личностного подхода студентов к освоению тематического словарного запаса на английском языке

В статье представлены результаты исследования, в котором участвовали 606 студентов из 18 стран Европы, Азии и Африки, и связанного с их подходом к изучению лексики по теме «Одежда и спорт». Основной посыл относится к концепции мастерства, т.е. личностной организации словарного запаса как по теме, так и вокруг нее. Результаты показывают, что респонденты ценят практику, поддерживающую легкое владение словами и выражениями, корректное использование языка и его беглость. Однако в большей степени они недооценивают значение самого процесса изучения языка, направленного на их ориентацию в структурных аспектах изучаемой темы (к примеру, разделение на тематические субкатегории, комбинирование с другими темами и др.).

Ключевые слова: *личностный подход к языку, структурировать собственный английский язык, мастерство, словарь английского языка, изучение второго языка.*

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From the concept of masterpiece in ESL studies to the research tool

The major premise underlying this paper is that there is a far- and deep-reaching similarity between the learning of a foreign language and the composing of music¹. The room for language composing occurs both across and within lexical fields. The former case means that, on the one hand, there are “must-learn” topics without which language learners cannot pass as proficient language users – just as in music one simply has to recognise and be familiar with best-known pieces – such as *Family*, *Weather* or *Food & Drink*, and, on the other hand, there are those which are less common and thus not expected to lie within every user’s command of their second language, be it *Geology*, *Binomials* or *Fuels* (these fields can be regarded as “can-learn” topics).

¹ The likeness does not pertain here to the two most common traditions of seeing the language-music link, that is developmental interdependence (as in e.g. McCullen & Saffran 2004) or technical aspects of mastering the two disciplines (the need for regularity and persistence, improved sound quality, etc.), but it relates strictly to the (conscious) formation of one’s personal construction, complex in nature and never entirely complete.

This being the case, language learners invariably arrive at their own combinations of topics, which can be referred to as e.g. 'composing their own English'². In the latter case, that is within a particular topic, their situation is fully analogous: on the one hand, they need to become familiar with a set of most frequently used, most relevant and most often taught vocabulary (e.g. in the area of *Weather* it will cover words such as 'rain', 'snow', 'cloudy' or 'windy') – just as in music no musician will remain unfamiliar with the basic repertoire of notes – and, on the other hand, they will be free to expand their topical competence and add to it less frequent or obvious items or expressions such as 'drizzle', 'rain cats and dogs', 'clear up' or 'hail'. Inside topics they will thus have room for composing, too, and will arrive at their unique combinations or, as it has been technically coined – their own intralanguages.

In such a composition-based approach to language learning, the putting of language elements together becomes "highly explicit and completely open to conscious analysis" (Lantolf 2011:36), which constitutes learners' important (largely theoretical) know-how and which renders the entire approach strongly sociocultural and heavily dependent on what and how topics are viewed and discussed. At the same time, the learners' emotional stance is brought to the fore in that it is considered what modality (i.e. obligation or possibility) goes with particular topics, which can be viewed as a novel way and stage in the treatment of affect significantly changing and being subject of research over the last decades (Cf. Barcelos 2015:306), but largely assigning it to a foreign language as a whole rather than particular issues within that tongue.

It naturally follows from the above that if informed and trained well, language learners are in a position to create – by way of their personal (and emotionally charged) choices – true masterpieces, that is compositions (combinations) of topics and vocabulary never encountered before. Just as in music, their creation requires ample knowledge and sufficient skill consisting in, among other things, employing conventions (foundations, typical collocations etc.), on the one hand, and developing novel arrangements (blends of topics, well-sounding lexical replacements), on the other hand. Putting aside a discussion on many other similarities to the discipline to music (related to types of music, the role of a conductor, the relationship between lyrics and the tune, etc.), we shall add three notes here: first, such masterpieces, by definition, will not lend themselves easily to valuation, which implies that comparing one with another will unavoidably prove erroneous and thus fully futile; second, with the notion of a masterpiece and language learners' realisation of it may help generate what Dörnyei and his team call *Directed Motivational Currents* forming superordinate motivational superstructures (Henry et al. 2015:330), and third, the idea of composition prompts authorial text creation, which, as Wenzel argues, effectively activates those higher mental processes that are reflected by the created texts themselves (Cf. Wenzel 2015: 113).

A question arises whether students from different countries approach this heavily personalized process of topic composition in a similar manner, which is a query constituting our main research problem here. For notwithstanding the above (that is limited possibilities of comparisons between individual masterpieces, as defined in the previous paragraph), there occur criteria that make it possible to specify the degree in which approaches to the individual construction of topical vocabulary (hereunder referred to as 'topic composition') are simply different (rather than objectively better). The criteria applied here for the sake of an international comparison relate to four facets of language learners' approach, namely their attitude to structure, lexis, correctness and fluency (see e.g. MacGowan-Gilhooly 1991:73).

The choice of these four aspects is justified here by – apart from the very fact that they have long been subject of numerous ELF texts and discussions – the observation that language learners tend to be (consciously or unconsciously) inclined to and to favour orderly or spontaneous vocabulary training, on the one hand, and grammatically correct or practically communicative language, on the other hand. The four facets appear to be amply indicative of learners' approach to language learning and, what adds to their suitability for the research, they largely conform to personal differences classically recognised by psychologists, i.e. global vs. fragmentary styles of learning conforming to structure- vs. lexis- orientation (or the other way round), and correctness- vs. fluency- orientation complying with reflexive vs. impulsive personalities. It can thus be noted that the research conducted here pertains to only these two psycholinguistic dimensions, which for the sake of clarity can be presented graphically (and to make it fully clear, we

² The issue of "composing your own English" (superior to this text's eponymous topic composition) has been discussed more extensively in another text by the author outlining both its theoretical foundations and practical applications (alongside a language teaching method following from the rationale presented). The approach presented there is a (highly) metacognitive one and meant for mature learners, who, despite oracy tending to be the subject matter of publications relating predominantly to children, are also both imprisoned and liberated by the power of language (Cf. Evans & Jones 2009: viii), which calls for development of personalized speaking-oriented approaches to EFL applicable to adult language learners.

may add that on both dimensions the two qualities do not exclude each other, but, on the whole, any language learner may prove to be markedly poised towards one of the two scale extremes) (Fig. 1).

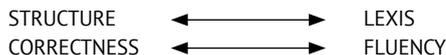


Fig. 1. Two key dimensions of personal approach to learning topics

Our research problem can now be made more specific and read: to what extent do language learners from different countries show distinct attitudes to (topical) structure, lexis, correctness and fluency during their topic composition?³ This question gains significance in the light of arguments given by linguistic anthropologists that it is speakers of different languages rather than these languages themselves that come into contact in any meaningful sense (Garrett 2004:50); given that each speaker holds his or her own convictions and individualised emotions concerning each language (with the emotional dimension being frequently disregarded in relevant literature), this perspective can be narrowed down in a constatation that it is personal emotionally-loaded attitudes to languages that actually “meet”.

To answer the said question, we shall consider what is the approach of language learners from different countries to a number of qualities through which their stance with regard to the said facets is manifested so as to take into account “the fallibility of single items” (Dörnyei & Csizér 2012:76) and thus meet the multi-item demand that each identified content area be addressed by several items (Cf. *ibidem*), namely.

1. Structure-orientation will be verified by the overall attitude to such concepts as divisions, hierarchies, classifications, order, or combinations, which has been operationalised for the sake of research through conversion into the following respective statements to be reflected upon second-language learners⁴ (the numbers in parentheses show the position of items in the research tool applied):

- I consider in details how vocabulary related to clothes can be divided (e.g. articles, patterns, sizes, etc.) (1);
- I recognize a hierarchy in clothes-related vocabulary (5);
- I classify the expressions I learn into subcategories (9);
- To support my learning, I look for order in clothes-related vocabulary (13);
- I try to learn clothes-related vocabulary by constructing sentences combining it with other topics (17).

2. Lexis-orientation will be verified by the overall attitude to such concepts as memorisation, numbers of words, word isolation, short replies, counting words, which has been operationalized through conversion into the following respective statements:

- When learning language related to clothes, I try to memorize as many words as possible (2);
- My success in communication related to clothes depends mostly on the number of words I have learnt (6);
- My ability to use words in isolation (e.g. about different shirts) is more important than forming full sentences (10);
- For me, a good command of clothes language mostly means knowing a lot of words (e.g. types, material, etc.) (14);
- Counting the words you know is a good idea (18).

³ It is important to note here that whilst a number of publications have addressed the issue of approach to English (as a lingua franca) across nations (see e.g. Linn et al.2015), the study discussed in this paper takes a more specific perspective by verifying language learners’ stance on particular semantic characteristics.

⁴ Two versions have been used in the study – one pertaining to the topic of ‘Clothes’ (cited above) and one concerning ‘Sport’, with the former having been applied with girls and the latter with boys. (This gender-based distinction was introduced on the grounds of the fact – not subjected to any form of judgment – that statistically speaking, sport remains males-dominated whereas clothes continue to be of a predominantly female interest. Quite unarguably, no topic is bound to appeal to every single student in all classes across nations. However, in a class where the said tendencies did not seem to occur, students were free to make their own choice as to the topical version they use.)

3. Correctness-orientation will be verified by the overall attitude to such concepts as certainty, checking words, grammaticality, taking risk, character of language sources, which has been operationalized through conversion into the following respective statements:

- To speak, I need to be sure that my sentence is correct (3);
- Before using words, I check how to use them properly (7);
- I believe that by articulating incorrect sentences about clothes you promote a harmful approach to language. (11)
- I think taking risk in building sentences is a bad idea (15);
- I carefully try to choose sources which present only correct use of language (19).

4. Fluency-orientation will be verified by the overall attitude to such concepts as speech anxiety, rate of speech, mistakes, contexts, social circumstances, which has been operationalized through conversion into the following respective statements:

- When talking about fashion and dressing styles, I stop worrying about making mistakes (4)*
- I'd rather be able to speak fast with mistakes rather than slowly but fully correct (8)*
- I believe you can consider yourself an advanced user of English even if you make lots of mistakes (12)*
- I may ignore single words unknown to me if I understand the general meaning in context (16)*
- I admire people who are not bothered by what others think when they speak and make language mistakes (20).*

In the research these twenty statements have been put together in an alternating order (structure-lexis-correctness-fluency) repeated five times to form a questionnaire with a Likert-type scale reading 'Definitely NOT-Rather NOT-Hard to say-Rather YES-Definitely YES'. Technically speaking, such a procedure meant that when converted into quantitative values, the respondents' choices could theoretically reach 100 "points" (20x5) at the most and 20 "points" (20x1) at the least. It must be emphasised, however, that the conversion into numerical values has served purely a supportive function so that overall tendencies could be recognised across the participating nations and they are by no means meant to be interpreted as indicators of cut-and-dried language-learning behaviours. Instead, these values can simply be seen as indicative of the learners' degree of determination to study the second language (here: English) by becoming familiar with language "belonging" to topics.

From the search for the universal element to hypotheses

Construction of a masterpiece as defined above requires attention to all the four facets covered by the research presented here: a language learner highly proficient in a particular topic will (i) recognise its structure (allowing him or her, among other things, to detect topical sub-fields in which there still remains a lot to be learnt), (ii) strive to enlarge his or her vocabulary repertoire (enabling him or her to, for example, score high in lexical tests), (iii) appreciate correctness (determining the learner's success in a wide range of formalised settings, be it academic positions or white-collar jobs), and (iv) value fluent speech (generally regarded as a primary characteristic of advanced users of languages).

Such an omni-faceted command of a topic can be viewed as a desired (largely hypothetical only) point of destination in learning any lexical topic (naturally, inclusive of the learner's mastery of multifarious qualities of topical vocabulary, be it syntactic, semantic, pragmatic or phonetic). It is through such all-round progress that learners are led to view themselves as truly mastering particular language issues; such perception on their part is well known to aid their cognition, which has recently been discussed by numerous publications concerning attention to affect by (not only) second-language teachers (cf. e.g. Arnold 2001:13). It follows from the above that learners' resignation from any of the four facets or its more "relaxed" treatment will be detrimental to the full mastery of a topic and will prevent them from reaching the said destination.

In global terms, at the times when communicative success appears to be valued higher than linguistic perfection (after the concept of communicative competence has superseded that of linguistic competence), we may anticipate that the second and the fourth facets will locate learners closer to the said destination point than the other two facets, meaning that they are most likely to value extensive repertoires of vocabulary and quick speech higher than their orien-

tation in what the build-up of particular topics is and grammatical correctness. This perception on the part of learners of what brings them close to complete master of a topic can be represented graphically in the following way (Fig. 2).

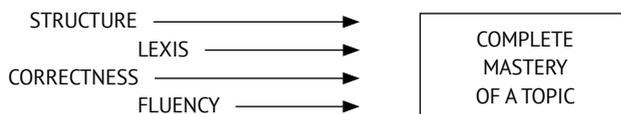


Fig. 2. Anticipated perception of the relationship between four facets and language mastery

It must be borne in mind here that the graph is meant to represent *attitudes* rather than actual achievements: the currently predominant ideas of language proficiency seem to encourage learners to undertake actions and practice behaviours and exercises enhancing their lexis and fluency, partially at the cost of language practices developing their structural orientation and fully correct applications of the vocabulary learnt.

On the other hand, this universal lexis-and-fluency-oriented trend has – for more or less two decades — been accompanied by publications, discussions and recommendations accentuating the concept and importance of language awareness. This fact, at least on the surface, appears significant to how learners approach the learning of topics and act against the aforementioned somewhat unbalanced attitude to language: it seems highly probable that the more *explicit* knowledge about language learners acquire and the more *sensitive* they become to language characteristics (with such descriptors being used in studies and practices aimed at increased language awareness), the more conscious of what particular topics encompass (i.e. their structure) and the more attentive they become to the form of language (i.e. correctness). In other words, greater emphasis on how a foreign language is used causes learners to be more aware of the fact that to be true “masters” of particular topics, they need to be cognizant of their structure and of what is grammatically correct, whereby the aforementioned unbalance in the learners’ perception of topical success becomes smaller.

Nonetheless, it can still be anticipated that, on the whole, learners from different countries will regard language practices improving their lexis and fluency of speech as more significant than those focused on the build-up of topics and correct uses of language (somewhat regardless of how the latter may support the former and render learners genuinely advanced). It can also be argued and assumed that enlarging one’s lexis and increasing one’s rate of speech appear to be more easily attainable and the progress on these two strata seems to be more readily controllable than that in structure and correctness, which means that on the surface the development on the level of lexis and fluency, as Dewaele puts it, “keeps the [learner’s] affective tank full” (Dewaele 2015:13) more effectively. This overall inclination of learners can thus be expressed as the key research hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Foreign language learners value language practices enhancing their lexis and fluency higher than those improving their structural orientation and correct language use.

This assumed prioritisation of lexis and fluency over structure and correctness additionally implies that the former (the right extremes of the scales presented in the first section of this paper) are altogether subject to more systematic reflection on the part of learners than the latter (i.e. the left extremes of the two scales). The assumption rests, apart from the author’s regular observations from the perspective of a language teacher, on frequently encountered discussions about L2 speech production being multifoldedly demanding (Cameron 2001:36) and engaging learners “in [more intense] fire” of psycholinguistic mechanisms (Mota 2010:226), the logical consequence of which that the fluent application of lexis requires far-reaching attention. Accordingly, language learners can be expected, for instance, to reflect on preferred ways of memorising vocabulary more than on, say, divisions within particular topics. Hence, in the items of the research tool pertaining to structure and correctness, more ‘Hard to say’ answers are likely to be observed, which gives rise to the second, more specific hypothesis reading:

Hypothesis 2: Foreign language learners show more attention to the learning of lexis and fluency in a given topic than to its structure and correct use of language.

Given that reflection on language-learning practices retain a universal character, meaning that, generally speaking, it does not pertain to separate topics but rather various lexical fields, it can be expected that language learners will give more positive responses in the case of those statements in which a specific topic is not named, but, instead, commonsensical attitudes are described (e.g. checking words before using them, selection of sources, speaking fast without inhibitions etc.). Although the instruction preceding the set of statements did request respondents to con-

centrate on a particular topic (i.e. Clothes or Sport), the explicit reference to the topic was made only in half of the statements so that it could be studied how replies vary on this general-specific scale. Hence:

Hypothesis 3: Foreign language learners demonstrate more consideration of universal language behaviours than those pertaining to particular topics.

If considered jointly, the first and third hypotheses imply that respondents can be expected to be most positive about those language-learning practices which help them develop lexis or (the rate of) speech “across the lexical board” and most sceptical or hesitant about those behaviours through which they become familiar with the structure or correct use of language elements pertaining to (only) separate topics. This seems to be a highly significant issue because if this assumption was proved right, it might indicate that language learners put themselves at a disadvantage situation by taking an approach which can only yield a markedly superficial command of language. This joint hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis 4: Foreign language learners favour such practices that universally apply to lexis and fluency over those enhancing topical orientation in structure and correctness.

For the sake of clarity (although running the risk of misleading simplicity), the assumptions made under the four hypotheses can be exemplified by anticipated (quantitative) differences in responses observed (yet it must be borne in mind that each of the four facets was addressed with five items each, which means that the tendencies presented below are only tentative and have been cited for clarification purposes):

- ♦ Ad. Hyp. 1: Respondents’ markings to the item *When learning language related to clothes, I try to memorise as many words as possible* are expected to be higher (i.e. poised towards ‘Rather yes’ and ‘Definitely yes’ answers than those to the item *I consider in details how vocabulary related to clothes can be divided*;
- ♦ Ad. Hyp. 2: Respondents’ markings to the item *Counting the words you know is a good idea* are expected to be more unequivocal (and thus less frequently indicated by the hesitant ‘Hard to say’) than those to the item *I classify the expressions I learn into subcategories*;
- ♦ Ad. Hyp. 3: Respondents’ markings to the item *I carefully try to choose sources which present only correct use of language* are expected to be more positive than those to the item *I believe that by articulating incorrect sentences about sport you promote a harmful approach to language*;
- ♦ Ad. Hyp. 4: Respondents’ markings to the item *I may ignore single words unknown to me if I understand the general meaning in context* are expected to be (significantly) higher (i.e. more positive) than those to the item *I try to learn sport-related vocabulary by constructing sentences combining it with other topics*.

From the search for the continental element to research outcomes

Although the research is not aimed at a direct comparison between language learners from different countries participating in it (such a study will be the subject matter of the author’s next text), the analysis of results has taken into consideration most apparent national characteristics manifested through the respondents’ choices. It has been assumed here that such intercultural divergence – resulting from what has been referred in literature as the foregrounding of the sociocultural rather than the psychological (cf. McKinney & Norton 2008:192) – will indeed be observed in learners’ approach with regard to its all four facets, especially in the case of those countries whose citizens are either commonly believed to be particularly outspoken or reticent (as is the case with Spaniards and Japanese people, respectively) or have grown up in states where the foreign language (English) has been an integral part of general education for a longer or shorter time (be it Denmark or Romania, respectively).

Stereotypical or superficial as these qualities may appear, their existence was clearly borne out by the respondents’ own statements provided alongside the questionnaire choices discussed herein (a discussion of their written remarks on the learning of particular topics will be the subject matter of yet another text). One of the basic premises underlying the research conducted is that the fact brought to the fore by linguistic anthropologists that by “repetitive, recursively linked and yet not necessarily identical communicative acts [...] society is reconstituted” (Duranti 1997:338) concerns also the emotional attitude to language and its use, which is both strongly embedded in national traditions and exceedingly hard to examine.

Before the results are outlined, a short reflection is necessary on the fact that the research and the questionnaire have involved English, the contemporary status of which is undoubtedly unique across the globe and the omnipresence of which has rendered it “a ‘taken-for-granted’ component of world curriculum models (Cf. Cha & Ham 2008:325).

Its global omnipresence, attributed to the sufficient adaptability and changeability of the language for writers from different continents recognising its linguistic space to express their experience (Cf. Brutt-Griffler 2002: ix) must – hard to measure as this cause-and-effect relationship is – affect the respondents' approach to learning this lingua franca in all the four dimensions addressed in the study: with extensive vocabulary being used worldwide, correctness becoming increasingly relevant, fluent speech being encountered on a daily basis via various media, and the build-up of topics losing its clear-cut character as a result of vocabulary expansion, the respondents' attitude and perception of English are bound to be affected by its popularity. It might thus be worthwhile considering how language learners approach other foreign (less popular) languages, too, which, obviously, lies beyond the scope of this paper. Notwithstanding the said omnipresence of English most likely to render the respondents' attitude far more positive, it pays to analyse in which of the aforementioned four facets language learners gain or lose the most. For this reason, after some general observations are made on the outcomes, the discussion of results will be organised around the approach to the four facets in the order adopted in the first section, after which direct references to the four hypotheses above will be made.

The research was conducted with the total of 606 respondents from 14 European and 4 Asian and African countries, namely Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, (the European part of) Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, and Iraq, Japan, the Republic of South Africa, Turkey. The respondents are university students whose major is not related to languages and so they study English as one of courses secondary to their main official qualifications. Two parallel versions of questionnaire have been applied, one focused on the topic of *Clothes* and the other on *Sport*, so as to increase the likelihood of the respondents being familiar and – interested in the topic exploited by the tool. It has been advised that – due to traditional and still dominant indisputable tendencies – girls and boys use the former and the latter version, respectively, although in situations where the respondents' interests ran counter to such stereotypical traditions, it was allowed for them to use the version they prefer. After all, the two versions were applied not to study differences between genders, but to secure the respondents find their topics of ample interest.

The most general observation that can be made on the basis of the results obtained is that, on the whole, they put themselves at a disadvantage by taking an approach in which they resign from practices likely to boost their language learning. In both versions of the questionnaire the respondents showed marked ambivalence regarding as many as nearly a half of the aforementioned twenty (language-beneficial) stances, which in numerical terms was manifested by overall scores of 64.7 and 64.4 "points" (out of 100) calculated for the *Clothes*- and *Sport*-oriented tools respectively, with the mean, most interestingly, equalling 3.2 in both the versions. Quite naturally, the said ambivalence and the resulting scores pertain to various (combinations of) twenty language-learning practices, yielding distinctive 'masterpieces' as defined above. This point will be discussed at greater length later in the text.

On a very general level, too, a note needs to be made on a cross-continental outcome that became most apparent at a very early stage of the analysis of results: (with both versions of the questionnaire) the biggest difference observed between European vs. Asian and African language learners (362 and 264 respondents respectively) pertained to the idea of counting familiar words as a separate item of the questionnaire and to practices supporting the learning of lexis as a block of items considered together. Specifically, these two outcomes – noticeably outstanding within the entire data set from 606 learners – suggest that the Asian and African language learners value their familiarity with decontextualized vocabulary and their awareness of its volume more than their European peers.

What has proved to be of paramount importance in the analysis is marked comparability of results obtained from the two versions of the questionnaire. This quality, that is consistence between the two versions, served as the major determinant of the credibility of outcomes. For although numerical values have been applied for the sake of comparisons, the reliability of scores could not be verified by calculating correlation indexes as the choices made indicate personal preferences, the alterity of which renders it unjustifiable to assume that if any given language learning practice is not accompanied by any other behaviour, then the tool is lacking in necessary reliability.

Such an assumption would be tantamount to imposing limits on the personalness of cognitive experience, which – in all sound educational settings – remains unique and leaves one choice as to what language learning practices to favour as such that give one the sense of achievement and satisfaction. For this reason, it is the consistence between results obtained with the two versions that substantiates the observations below concerning all the facets of mastering different topics. It has thus been presumed and confirmed by the results obtained that personal language learning practices do not substantially vary from topic to topic, but rather remain sufficiently constant and thus can serve as an indicator of tool credibility.

Considering practices pertaining to structure, the least appreciated ones prove those that are aimed at classification of subcategories within topics or – what can be viewed as synonymous and so indicative of the reliability of outcomes – recognition of hierarchies across topical vocabulary. Any mention of relationships (even in the first item used, which also concerns topical subdivisions) shows a more positive attitude on the part of respondents, who seem to have most positive connotations regarding the idea of context and, as a result, find connecting words and expressions a highly commonsensical thing to do. It appears, however, that – as follows from observations across the components of the questionnaire – positive associations to do with relationships between language elements pertain more to *intra*-topical than to *inter*-topical blends. Putting together the two major observations concerning structure, it can be inferred that the respondents value building up larger wholes out of separate components, but they are significantly less concerned about what classes the words or expressions joined belong to. This being the case, their awareness of the character and range of possible (especially *inter*-topical) blends is likely to remain limited if they are not instructed on the beneficial edge of realising the very existence of numerous unfamiliar blends.

Responses concerning LEXIS, apart from the already mentioned intercontinental difference in the overall approach to lexis, show motivation of learners to enlarge their repertoire of words, on the one hand, but significantly lower determination to monitor this process by, for instance, counting the words, on the other hand. This general tendency is accompanied by a markedly more positive attitude of the Asian and African respondents to such quantitative measures, which is borne out also by their appreciation of familiarity with isolated words. The European respondents prove to be decidedly more sceptical about the ability to use words devoid of context, with the approach of the Asian and African respondents being on the verge between positive and negative (i.e. the average score falling in the two versions slightly above 3.0 denoting indecision in this respect).

The (declarative) approach to correctness has proved essentially positive. Most interestingly, with both versions of the questionnaire the respondents generally maintain that they need to be sure about sentences being correct and check how to use words properly before they actually speak and that they try to choose sources which present only correct use of language (with all these three habits being more frequently revealed by the Asian and African respondents). Yet, in another item they show that they do not view articulation of incorrect sentences as being harmful to language. Considered jointly, these two results imply that, on the whole, the group of 606 respondents are concerned about their own way of learning and using English, but not so much about how it is done by others. Regardless of whether we refer to such an approach (negatively) as ‘egocentrism’ or (positively) as ‘self-awareness’, it is undoubtedly better than the opposite case (i.e. one’s concern for others’ use of English exceeding that for one’s own) in being conducive to one’s learning achievements.

The responses pertaining to fluency show the following two most important effects: first, fast speaking is not a target that the respondents wish to reach at the cost of correctness, and, second, when it comes to fluent speech, the respondents are inclined to admiration for others who speak fluently, even if they do it with language mistakes. Viewed jointly with the earlier observations, the latter observation reveals greater attention being paid to advanced language performance than to errors obstructing language perfection. Such a tendency seems natural in that it is but human to expect others to err and thus not be disturbed by errors, on the one hand, and, consequently, to be impressed by those whose mistakes are few and far between, on the other hand (similarly to the domain of, say, sport, in which we all fail, and contrary to the domain of ethics, in which most of us are not thoroughly evil).

The results above obtained from an analysis of the four facets and concerning primarily little concern for classifications, aspirations to enlarge vocabulary repertoire altogether, attention to one’s own language mistakes (as opposed to errors committed by others), and, finally, admiration for fast-speaking language users can be better understood and more clearly discussed once the four facets are juxtaposed. Similarly to the observations above pertaining to individual facets, a multi-faceted study leads us to observations which appear to be universally valid across (18) nations as well those of a continental character. These points are addressed below under references made to the four key hypotheses of the research.

Ad. Hypothesis 1. The two versions of the questionnaire consistently show the practices building up the learners’ orientation in structural aspects of topics to be the ones least valued as compared to the other three facets. This fact proves one half of the first hypothesis, which has been refuted with respect to lexis as not necessarily being more appreciated than correct uses of the English language. In other words, the group of 606 respondents reflect on divisions and classifications within and across particular topics less frequently than on construction

of correct sentences or acquisition of new words. Considered jointly, the facets of lexis and fluency do in fact yield a higher degree of appreciation by learners, which is a fact additionally confirming the hypothesis; yet, this is mainly due to the said lower result obtained on the level of structure, which is big enough a difference from the other facets to "mask" the fact that the approach taken to lexis proves as positive as to the facets of correctness and fluency.

Ad. Hypothesis 2. It is with regard to the structural facet, too, that the highest indecisiveness of respondents has been observed: among both the 367 respondents that reflected on the lexis of *Clothes* as well the 239 learners who responded to items concerning *Sport* nearly one third of markings showed their doubt expressed with the 'Hard to say' option, as compared to only one fifth in all the other three facets. The same effect was found with the respondents from Europe and from Asia and Africa, although – especially in the case of *Sport* – the European respondents showed greater hesitation. The second hypothesis thus being proved right, the respondents reveal uncertainty about how they should feel about thoughtful organisation of language elements within and across topics. This effect has been scattered equally across the questionnaire items pertaining to the structural facet, with only one item (No. 5 reading "I recognise a hierarchy...") standing out in the case of the European respondents, who in the questionnaire on *Sport* showed substantial uncertainty (as many as 60 out of 125 marked the 'Hard to say' option).

Ad. Hypothesis 3. As the responses were compared on the topical-vs-general spectrum, the following – highly significant – twofold outcome became apparent: on the one hand, the respondents showed only minor differences in their approach to practices applying generally vs. those functional in a given topic, with the latter even slightly exceeding the former; on the other hand, they demonstrated significantly higher uncertainty in the case of statements pertaining to topics than the universally-formulated ones (roughly, every fourth topical and every fifth universal statement caused doubt, with the European respondents showing greater hesitation). The third hypothesis can thus be viewed to have been proved right if 'consideration of behaviours' is to be construed as tantamount to theoretical reflection only, but it needs to have been proved wrong if it is accepted that genuine 'consideration' can only be shown in practice (or here: through the percentage of respondents' actual choices).

Ad. Hypothesis 4. A similar discrepancy between declarative approaches and actual choices has been observed with regard to the last hypothesis: whilst the respondents' attitude to (six) practices supporting general improvement in lexis and fluency (Items 8, 10, 12, 16, 18, 20) has proved nearly identical (in numerical terms) to other (six) behaviours boosting orientation in the facets of structure and correctness (Items 1, 3, 5, 11, 13, 17) (with no significant intercontinental differences observed), the respondents demonstrated substantially greater uncertainty with regard to the topic-oriented statements than those of a general appeal. The discrepancy in question was observed predominantly with the 342 European respondents, who signalled doubt (by either marking the 'Hard to say' option or leaving a given statement unmarked) in nearly 30% of all the six topical items altogether (i.e. in two versions of the questionnaire). This effect was particularly noticeable in the field of *Clothes*, the interpretation of which, as intriguing as it is, falls beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to note here that the observed degree of respondents' hesitation (falling between 18% in the group of Asian and African learners focused on the issue of *Clothes* and 29% in the two groups of European students focused on one or the other topic) merits careful attention and action for the respondents and their peers not to be remain so unaware and indecisive.

From the social and personal context to study conclusions

Personal as the approach to language learning needs to be seen for students to feel at liberty to study in ways they find most pleasant and/or convenient, the intercontinental differences found in the research have proved it to be socially determined, too. Although intercontinental or international comparisons have not been the key aim of the analyses conducted, some dissimilarities became too evident to leave them without at least brief remarks. On the

whole, the differences in question, most importantly, have implied the Asian and African respondents being more reflective as to their learning of language than their European peers, who, in turn, seem to benefit in some sense from their more spontaneous or even risky attitude to verbal communication. In both cases, though, such continental qualities may be considered a virtue as well as a vice, which, however, is a discussion falling beyond the scope of this paper. As for cross-national differences, the differences revealed by numerical values proved too small to merit an in-depth discussion here.

The primary conclusion following the entire data set aggregated with respondents from 18 countries concerns the facet of intra- and inter-topical STRUCTURE as being subject of lesser reflection than the other three facets, i.e. lexis, fluency, and – somewhat unexpectedly – correctness. Such results imply that generally language learners become complacent about their control over English before they become aware of the range of options (combinations, blends, etc.) and divisions (hierarchies, orders etc.) occurring within and across different topics.

Therefore, regardless of whether it is an effect of insufficient training or the learners' personal choice (although the degree of similarity between responses renders the former more likely), the group of 606 respondents demonstrate what we may refer to as **informative control** over the second language but they fail to show the (complimentary) **formal control** over it. In other words, they prove to be more concerned about the content, the message and communication than about the build-up of language, the form or meta-language. The two types of control could also be referred to in, respectively, qualitative and quantitative terms, with subject matter being “cherished” more than its volume or size; this appears analogous to two types of characteristics of languages themselves, in the case of which the quantitative features of particular structures can pose a varying challenge to language learners caused by how rarely or frequently they are applied for learning and/or real-time use (cf. Bates et al. 2001:317).

Natural as it may seem, their disregard for the structural aspects unavoidably pose an obstacle to yet better familiarity with how English works and as such should be a component or language teaching and learning. This applies to two strata on which limited formal control has been observed in the study: on the syntactic level (with learners acquainting themselves what “pieces” can be put together and how, what other combinations are available inside and across topics etc.) and on the semantic level (with learners developing competence in the conscious blending of topics, deliberate juxtaposing of concepts belonging to different thematic fields etc.). As follows from the earlier remarks, although under some questionnaire items the respondents claim to value inter-topical relationships (and when learning thematic vocabulary, they “construct sentences combining it with other topics”), they are in serious doubt when presented with statements concerning practices supporting their formal control over the foreign language.

The second major conclusion the facet of CORRECTNESS, with regard to which one of the key hypotheses was disproved. It has been found that the respondents care about grammaticality more than initially anticipated and value practices supporting it (although they are not strongly bothered by language mistakes made by others). It needs to be emphasised, however, that the questionnaire is by no means a measure of learning achievement and it rests on respondents' declarations only. It may still be that the global tendencies mentioned earlier in the text do lead to lower levels of correctness and it is perfectly natural that language learners do not signal their potential disregard for grammar and correctness. What merits consideration and further cross-national studies here is how strong a discrepancy occurs between declarations concerning practices supporting correctness and its degree in the actual use of language by second-language learners. Whilst in the case of structural aspects, a marked divergence has been observed between declarations and decisions, in the case of items pertaining to correctness the degree of indecision was lower and comparable to that concerning fluency and lexis, but the discrepancy may occur between declarations and achievements.

To make the results obtained from a large set of data, it appears worthwhile to derive from it a position taken with regard to the learning of topics (at least *Clothes* and *Sport*) by a (hypothetical) average learner participating in the research (similarly to how it is done with comprehensive statistical studies to make them more easily readable and applicable). That learner's “voice” expresses rationale along the following lines: *I learn as many words as I think I need and I make sure that what I learn is correct. But I'm not in the habit of organising these words in any way or finding out what is the exact number of words I know. I do my best to avoid mistakes and often resign from speaking if I'm not sure how to say things properly. On the other hand, I realise that others make a lot of them and it is not the most important thing in communication. Generally speaking, the message is crucial, not the form. I'm not sure why or if I should classify the vocabulary I learn.* It thus follows that in the respondents' average perception of language success three out of four facets lead one to the mastery of language, with the facet of STRUCTURE remaining largely alien

and not recognised as needed. This average perception can be presented with a modified version of the figure from the second section of the paper (Fig. 3).

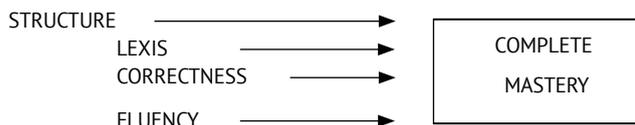


Fig. 3. Perception of the relationship between four facets and language mastery – as shown by results

Conclusion

The research outcome reflected by the “voice” cited and the figure above is of paramount importance for the concept of *masterpiece* as defined in the first section: the marked disregard for practices supporting language learners’ awareness of relationships within and, most importantly, across various topics prevents them from arriving (deliberately) at combinations encountered before, which is tantamount to hampering their communicative skills and cognitive potential, and which is likely to cause their language to become fossilised.

The tendency to value practices supporting lexis, fluency and correctness more than inter-topical structural orientation proves scattered across respondents from all the participating nations, although more detailed studies are necessary to recognise the exact character and degree of international differences (some of them will be addressed in another text by the author with will rest on topic-based remarks gathered from the same group of 606 respondents).

It may be the case that the structural facet of language learning has come to appear as most remote or alien to learners, who view the language learnt as a practical tool for communicative practices rather than the subject for meta-reflection; such a perception of the structural facet as a formal element, imposed on the learner instead of being left for his or her own choice, which creates circumstances in which acquisition of a second language becomes a partial or complete failure (Annoussamy 2006:86), calls for a radical modification of the approach so that the facet becomes much more “student-friendly”.

In the light of the apparent intercontinental differences between the approach of the European respondents and those from Asia and Africa, it must be noted here that similar studies may not only help discover further continental or national characteristics, but in some sense also serve better understanding between continents and nations. Looking at the (underestimated) issue of structural orientation from the teacher’s perspective, the results presented above make it clear that the conclusion drawn by e.g. Arnold and Douglas that by adding this aspect to the language teacher’s competence will, somewhat paradoxically, not pose an extra burden but serve as facilitation and serve students’ holistic language development (cf. Arnold & Brown 1999: 24), is fully justified.

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