AN EGP EXPERIMENT AT THE TODOR KABLESHKOV UNIVERSITY OF TRANSPORT: STUDENT RESEARCH IMPACT ON STUDENTS' LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND AUTONOMY

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Abstract: The current paper represents a continuation of a previous study written by the author and devoted to investigating the presumed university students' research advantages in terms of English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching, with respect to learners' language awareness (LA) and autonomy (LrA) improvement. The article describes an EGP university students' research experiment, developed and conducted by the author, at the Todor Kableshkov University of Transport, Bulgaria, in the objective of checking the hypothesis of student research positive impact on LA and LrA. Author-guided student exploration was performed within the framework of the English article system with the purpose to determine articles values and uses. To more completely elucidate researched matters, some contrasts were established in terms of the examined English category Bulgarian equivalents, mainly through carried out author-supervised educational purpose translation. The experiment consisted of two central tasks, the first one, related to exploring recommended practical grammar sources and extracting fundamentals as to English articles essence, and the second one, directed at analyzing an exemplifying text in English concerning researched category functioning, and, then, translating the text to Bulgarian. Students were asked to complete a 16-item questionnaire regarding learner research influence on LA and LrA. Survey findings are presented and conclusions are mainly made as to carried out student research influence on experiment participants' LA and LrA enhancement.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current study represents a previous material continuation [1], focusing on examining the presumed university students' research advantages in terms of educational process improvement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, EFL including English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) subdivisions. Referred to work hypothesizes fundamentally, based on literature data on research essence, university student research relevance in terms of learner accomplishments, author's studies and experience, that:

- University students' research impacts positively their language awareness (LA), and, thus, their learner autonomy (LrA), due to already revealed LA/LrA positive relatedness.

This paper is essentially aimed at describing and theoretically supporting a developed, conducted and analyzed by the author applied linguistics experiment in the objective of checking the above assumption.

The considered student research experiment is performed with EGP university students within the theoretical fundamentals framework of LA and LrA formation and improvement, applied in the field of the English article system, English articles creating significant mastering obstacles to a vast majority of learners, even advanced level ones [2]. Furthermore, in compliance with [3], articles implementation problems, along with tense, aspect use and subject/verb agreement drawbacks, turn out to be typical to nearly all EFL[1] learners, their writing assignments revealing "the writer is working in a second language" [3: 80]. To yet another source [4], "The English article system is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for nonnative speakers and one of the latest to be fully acquired" [4: 461]. In agreement with [5], a number of lecturers "report that articles are often their number one difficulty" [5: 135], which is in line with the statement that, notwithstanding the profusion of articles in language, "English articles are a remarkably complex system to acquire" [5: 135].

Besides acquisition hardships, another compelling reason to focus more attention on the English article system explanation and teaching, through students' research tasks including, is the fact that, according to literature sources, articles are some of the most regularly used English language words, definite article *the* being the most recurrent and indefinite article *a*, the fifth in commonness ([6] in [3] and [7]). To authors cited in [2] articles belong to the group of the English most often repeated function words, whereas to [7: 221] articles "are among the most frequently occurring free morphemes in English".

Finally, yet importantly, present student research experiment is additionally motivated by the fact that it has already become evident that teaching learners the English article system through clear explanation [7] and assuming methodical article training approach [4] leads to learner performance enhancement. Carrying out investigation process creates further opportunities for explanatory procedures application.

The current paper will comply with the following layout. First, the above mentioned student research experiment will be delineated with student tasks being referred to. Second, survey items results will be presented, followed by findings analysis. Finally, conclusions will be made as to university students' research beneficial impact on LA and LrA and consequently, these learners' research crucial importance in EGP communicative competence improvement.

2. STUDENT RESEARCH DESCRIPTION: TASKS

Before getting acquainted with research tasks, EGP university students were informed, through written learner-friendly explanation in Bulgarian as native language (NL), including a limited amount of linguistic terminology used, on the proposed experiment usefulness and appropriateness in terms of learners' communicative competence improvement due to:

- *English article system* and related concepts of *countability* and *uncountability* allowing interesting comparisons, carried out consciously and unconsciously, between categories in both, English and Bulgarian languages;

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[1] Although [3] treats English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' difficulties with articles use, in the current paper author's view, these issues equally apply to EFL students; what is more, *second language* term acceptation frequently coincides with this one of *foreign language*. The author subscribes to other mentioned categories ESL (or, EFL, in the author's opinion) learners face difficulties with mastering.

• Students' abilities to make language material comparisons, observations, analysis, hypothesis building and testing[2] allowing the learners *to extract on their own* essential information, prerequisite to conclusion making, in this case, as to the English article system functioning;

• The fact that *student research*[3], in general, endows learners with the opportunity to acquire better awareness of examined phenomena essence and functioning.

In compliance with [1], EGP students were requested to familiarize themselves with practical grammar sources ([8], [9], [10] and [11])[4] in the objective of making inferences in terms of *indefinite, definite and zero articles use* in the English language. Students were encouraged, to complete the task, to highlight the above sources essential information, find out as many as possible English articles values and uses, and, then, provide an exemplifying instance (or instances) for each use, based on recommended materials; learners were offered the option to also put forward their own illustrative examples inspired by the above sources. To facilitate research and make it more consistent, EGP students were recommended to complete, in the investigation process, a prepared by this paper author table, allowing the opportunities of listing essential values, uses of *indefinite, definite* and *zero articles* along with suitable exemplifying instances.

Having completed the table, EGP students were asked to proceed with the following task, focusing on an excerpted text material[5] [12: 82], designed to present essential English articles use and inspire thought in terms of articles meaning and implementation. University learners were requested to highlight in different colours *indefinite, definite and zero articles uses*, respectively, in referred to text material, in the objective of laying better emphasis on forms and more clearly notice patterns in articles implementation; based on knowledge acquired from practical grammar sources research, they were asked to determine individual instances implementation types. Students were also encouraged to systematize collected information in another table, allowing them to cite each article type occurrences in a separate column and, opposite, to include each individual instance value. EGP students were strongly recommended to translate the above mentioned illustrative text into Bulgarian with the purpose to take notes of English articles Bulgarian equivalences to be further considered through author-guided analysis.

After university student research was carried out in terms of the above tasks completion, related to collecting, retrieving, handling, systematizing various sources information and further applying the obtained data in conclusion making process, EGP learners shared their insights, often author-complemented and additionally elucidated. To benefit to a higher extent from performed research experiment, students were requested to complete a survey aimed at summarizing their attitudes towards language material investigation process. Students' answers value consists in testifying to student research relevance for teaching process parameters enhancement, on the one hand, and, on the other, in providing university learners with another opportunity to rethink performed exploration activities and, this way, obtain better awareness of investigated category essence and of the extent to which students' cognitive LLS use has improved.

Survey findings are presented in the following section tables (Tables 1 and 2).

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[2] EGP and ESP students receive regular training of these ones and related abilities through cognitive language learning strategies (LLS) (or cognitive approaches) teaching.

[3] Rf. to [1] as to definitions of *research* and *student research* relevance in terms of qualities, competences acquired, improved scientific exploration motivation, enhanced knowledge, etc., in various sources perspective.

[4] [8], [9], [10] and [11] are not referred to in [1].

[5] [12: 82] is referred to in [1]; [12: 82] is not cited herein for conciseness.

3. EGP STUDENT RESEARCH EXPERIMENT SURVEY: PRESENTATION

Table 1, which consists of five columns, respectively referring to LA[6] and LrA[7] parameters (or survey indices), as well as to the degrees to which (poor, satisfactory, good, very good or excellent) carried out students' research experiment had contributed to LA and LrA parameters. The final row presents the average evaluation of all 1 - 16 parameters improvement to poor, satisfactory, good, very good or excellent degrees.

Table 2 further summarizes survey analysis findings, displaying fourth and fifth columns results together, to lay emphasis on university learners' relatively high and high evaluation percentages.

Both tables results will be examined in the following section.

Table 1. Survey findings

Indices / Fulfilment degree in %	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very good or Excellent
1. Improvement of language information search skills[8]	-	-	**100**	-
2. Improvement of language information analysis skills	-	-	**100**	-
3. Improvement of paradigms form/semantics analysis skills	-	33.33	**66.67**	-
4. Improvement of hypothesis building skills as to studied categories values	-	-	33.33	**66.67**
5. Improvement of built hypothesis checking skills	-	-	**66.67**	33.33
6. Improvement of educational purpose translation skills	-	-	**66.67**	-
7. Improvement of skills for examined categories contrasting with their NL equivalents in terms of values and use	-	-	**100**	-
8. Improvement of skills for analyzing interdependence in categories use, e.g., between indefinite articles and countable nouns	-	-	**100**	-
9. Improvement of skills for analyzing interdependence in categories use, e.g., between indefinite, definite and zero articles and abstract nouns, uncountable nouns, superlatives, etc.	-	-	**100**	-
10. Achievement of researched category good understanding: values, use and use motivating reasons	-	-	**66.67**	33.33
11. Improvement of educational process analysis skills: determining categories difficult and easy to grasp features	-	-	33.33	**66.67**
12. Improvement of educational process analysis skills: investigating reasons for facing hardships in categories understanding and mastering	-	-	33.33	**66.67**
13. Improvement of skills for common work with lecturer	-	-	33.33	**66.67**
14. Improvement of skills for common work with other EGP students	-	33.33	-	**66,67**
15. Improvement of individual work skills	-	33.33	33.33	33.33
16. Enhancement of motivation for individual work outside classes	-	33.33	**66.67**	-
MEAN VALUES FOR ALL INDICES FULFILMENT IN %	-	**8.33**	**62.5**	**27.08**

Table 2. Survey findings generalization

MEAN VALUES FOR ALL INDICES FULFILMENT IN %	Poor	Satisfactory	Good + Very good or Excellent
	–	**8.33**	**89.58**

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[6] LA can be described as conscious and explicit knowledge about the essence and functioning of a specific language, languages and human language in general as well as aptitude of reflecting in that field. Teaching cognitive and metacognitive LLS, generally subsumed by the current paper author as cognitive LLS or cognitive approaches, is the main prerequisite to LA formation and improvement [13].

[7] LrA refers to learners' capability of individually studying and deciding on ways of performing learning process in terms of its most relevant, in their opinion, characteristics and components. Rf. to [14] as to definition of LrA, researchers' views on LrA essence and LA/LrA connection according to the current paper author's view.

[8] All 1 – 16 indices are considered within specific (involving this experiment researched category) tasks and in general.

4. SURVEY RESULTS ANALYSIS

Based on Table 1 results, conducted university students' research had turned out to be beneficial in terms of the improvement of indices assessed with high (66.67%) and very high (100%) percentages by university EGP learners. Thus, for instance, 100 % of experiment participants evaluated the enhancement (as having occurred to a *good degree*) of LA parameters related to *language information search* (index 1), *language information analysis* (index 2), *establishing English/NL contrasts* (index 7) and *analyzing interdependence in studied categories use* (indices 8 and 9). As shown, 66.67% of surveyed students estimated the improvement (as having occurred to *good, very good* or *excellent degrees*) of LA and LrA parameters concerning *paradigms form/semantics analysis* (index 3); *built hypothesis checking* (index 5); *educational purpose translation* (index 6); *researched category value and use understanding* (index 10); *outside classes individual work* (index 16) (*good improvement degree*), and *hypothesis building* (index 4); *determining taught categories difficult and easy to grasp features* (index 11); *investigating reasons for hardships in categories mastering* (index 12); *common work with lecturer* (index 13); *common work with other EGP students* (index 14) (*very good* or *excellent improvement degrees*). It needs to be likewise mentioned that no surveyed student treated research experiment influence on Table 1 indices, or LA and LrA parameters, as poor. It should be also noted that survey respondents identically assessed all indices improvement in terms of specific tasks (involving researched category) and in general (footnote 8).

Performed survey findings generalization in terms of mean values for all indices fulfilment degrees (Table 1) testifies to rather positive attitude of experiment participants in terms of student research impact on LA and LrA parameters, all indices mean evaluation amounting to *8.33%* (learners' *satisfactory* assessment), **62.5%** (learners' **good** assessment) and **27.08%** (learners' **very good** or **excellent assessment**). Further generalization (Table 2), based on adding *good*, *very good* or *excellent* learner evaluation percentages, leads to *satisfactory* assessment degree of *8.33%* and ***good, very good* or *excellent*** assessment degree of ***89.58%***.

5. CONCLUSION

The above presented university student research experiment, aimed at checking the hypothesis [1] of learners' investigation positive impact on their LA and LrA, was conducted in terms of a not only relevant topic, this one of the English language article system, due to articles high frequency use. This applied linguistics study was also developed within a matter exceptionally tough to master for many EFL learners, due to the examined category abstractness and, in compliance with [4], to the need of "simultaneous consideration of four features: definiteness [± definite], specificity [±specific], countability [±count], and number [±singular]" [4: 465] in article choice process.

The above shared survey analysis findings testify to the beneficial impact of university EGP students' research on LA as well as on LrA, 1 – 16 examined indices, referring to cognitive approaches improvement, prerequisite to LA as well as to LrA enhancement [14], on the one hand, and, on the other, concerning individual work capacity and motivation development. Studied indices advancing derives from research tasks required intense linguistic and language information processing, retrieving and handling, performed by EGP students in investigation process and supervised by the author. Such information treatment procedures lead to further acquisition of cognitive LLS (or cognitive approaches) due to their imminent and active implementation in exploratory activities.

Survey results analysis can be corroborated by the opinion one of respondents shared and, according to which, the elucidation of tasks answers performed by students themselves,

was "exceptionally useful" to better grasp language functioning; such approach, in this respondent's perspective, was more fruitful than just following course book rules.

It must be also noted that university student research is an essential factor, contributing to EGP learners' communicative competence improvement, LA and LrA representing, along with learner motivation, three essential teaching process parameters.

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ЕКСПЕРИМЕНТ В УЧЕБНИЯ ПРОЦЕС ПО АОЦ ВЪВ ВТУ „ТОДОР КАБЛЕШКОВ“: ВЛИЯНИЕТО НА ИЗСЛЕДОВАТЕЛСКАТА ДЕЙНОСТ НА СТУДЕНТИТЕ ВЪРХУ ЕЗИКОВАТА ИМ ОСЪЗНАТОСТ И АВТОНОМНОСТ

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Ключови думи: студентска изследователска дейност, езикова осъзнатост, автономност на обучаемите, система на членните форми в английския език

Резюме: Докладът е продължение на предишна разработка на автора, посветена на третирането на предполагаемите предимства на студентската изследователска дейност в учебния процес по английски език за общи цели (АОЦ) и английски език за специфични цели (АСЦ), при подобряването на езиковата осъзнатост (ЕО) и автономност (АО) на обучаемите. Статията описва разработен и проведен от автора експеримент относно студентската изследователска дейност в рамките на АОЦ на територията на ВТУ „Тодор Каблешков“, България, с цел проверка на хипотезата за положителното влияние на студентската изследователска работа върху ЕО и АО. Осъществено е направлявано от автора студентско проучване в рамките на системата на членните форми в английския език, насочено към определяне на значенията и употребите им. За постигане на по-пълно изясняване на изследваната тематика е извършено съпоставяне на разглежданата категория в английския език с българските й еквиваленти, най-вече с помощта на учебен превод, осъществен под ръководството на автора. Експериментът се състои от две основни задачи, като първата е свързана с проучване на препоръчани източници по практическа граматика и извличане на основните характеристики на английските членни форми, а втората цели анализ на текст на английски, илюстриращ функционирането на изследваната категория, и последващ превод на материала на български език. Попълнена е от студентите анкета, състояща се от 16 твърдения във връзка с влиянието на изследователската дейност на обучаемите върху ЕО и АО. Резултатите от проучването са представени и са направени изводи предимно относно влиянието на осъществената студентска изследователска дейност върху повишаването на ЕО и АО на участниците в експеримента.*