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LEARNING STRATEGIES AND STUDYING HABITS IN BILINGUAL SECONDARY EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Abstract

Nowadays, many education centres use bilingual teaching systems to allow students to learn subjects in a different language to their mother tongue. Knowing how these students learn is fundamental to not only improve students' own development, but to also improve the education system in general. Indeed, it is worth exploring and seeing what kind of learning strategies they use as they are useful and necessary tools that allow students to manage and process new information more efficiently and, in turn, to know what study habits they use. In other words, the way they face their academic tasks daily, the natural habits they have to permanently learn, which involves how individuals organise their time, space, and the specific techniques and methods they use to study, which also seem necessary tasks. A study was conducted with 455 secondary education students from an institute in the capital city of Zaragoza (Spain) to learn their study strategies and habits in relation to certain demographic variables, gender, age, academic year and family relations.

Keywords: Bilingualism, learning strategies, secondary education, study habits.

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1. Introduction

Doubtlessly in today's knowledge society, learning processes, and more specifically learning to learn, are becoming increasingly important. In relation to the academic world, students are obliged to use different types of learning strategies to fulfil the objectives set in the distinct syllabi of subjects. This is a complex construct, as the different definitions made over time witness (Bernad, 1999; Beltrán, 2003; Monereo & Pozo, 1999). For Gargallo, Suarez, & Ferreras (2007), learning strategies include cognitive metacognitive and conduct elements and motivation. Probably one of the most well accepted definitions of learning strategies today is that put forward by Weinstein, Husman, & Dierking (2000) "learning strategies include any thought, behaviour, belief or feeling that facilitates acquiring, understanding, and further transferring of knowledge and new skills" (p. 733). It can be stated that a consensus currently exists among several authors about the learning strategies definition. For the vast majority, strategies refer to how the mind processes information and how it is influenced by each individual's perceptions given the ultimate objective of learning more efficiently (Aliste, Real, Martinez, & Bravo, 2004). Authors like Beltrán (2003) define strategies as thinking tools that help learning to be empowered everywhere it is employed. Monereo (2001) talk about cognitive mediators when they refer to strategies and stresses teaching-learning using strategies. For this male author, using strategies allows subjects more and better accessibility to knowledge which, in turn, makes knowledge more useful.

It is necessary to bear in mind that both learning strategies and study habits/techniques are lifelong activities performed throughout individuals' lives. Not only do subjects use them in their studies or during academic periods, but also in their working/professional lives if they wish to efficiently solve the different problems they must face (González & Díaz, 2006). The relation between study habits and academic performance has been well studied over time (De Tagle, Osornio, Heshiki, & Garcés, 2008). Those students who have acquired certain study habits have found that they have enabled them to successfuly face certain learning situations and helped them with their own intellectual development. Moreover, these students tend to be more independent and study more autonomously.

It is worth examining bilingual students as they have to coordinate two linguistic systems. Evidently, this entails a series of benefits, but also poses some problems. Bilingualism offers certain improvements: increased mental flexibility; proper development of cognitive tasks related with attention and inhibition; better use of cognitive strategies to solve problems; an increase in the so-called metalinguistic conscience; better communication skill. The negative effects of bilingualism include: slightly delayed language acquisition; subsequent interferences with the phonological, lexical and grammar systems of both languages; vocabulary is sometimes poor in both languages. Thus, it can be stated that a wide variability in bilingual people's linguistic experiences exists, which entails variables that affect their undertaking different intellectual tasks (Ardila, 2012).

2. Problem Statement

Knowing better the study habits and learning strategies used by students who study in bilingual education systems is fundamental to improve teaching-learning processes.

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Analysing the main activities performed by students in their everyday tasks as students will allow us to improve teaching programmes and overcome the difficulties they may encounter when having to deal with different subjects.

3. Research Questions

- What study habits do ESO (compulsory Spanish Secondary Education) and higher secondary education students have? How do they plan studying?

- What strategies do ESO and higher secondary education students use when they study?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to know the learning habits and strategies that ESO and higher secondary education students use in bilingual education systems.

5. Research Methods

In this study, N= 344 students completed questionnaires, of whom 163 were males (48.5%) and 173 were females (51.5%). Their ages ranged from 12 to 18 years, and the 13-14-years olds obtained a higher percentage to represent Instruments. - The Questionnaire on Study Habits and Learning Strategies of the Universidad de Granada was used for secondary education students in relation to the general sample (43.7%).

Procedure. - Test passing was done by researchers from the Universidad de Zaragoza, and by the teachers/tutors of the Pignatelli Secondary Education Institute from different academic years. The test passing periods lasted 4 weeks, depending on students' tutoring times. After data collection, data were included in the SPSS 25 statistical package.

6. Findings

6.1.Planning and distributing time

When generally asked about how they planned their time, 62% stated they sometimes or never planned it, and only 10% said they always planned their time (see Fig. 1); 27% stated they did not fulfil the time they had planned. The results were similar for planning contents, with 47.7% of the students stating that they never planned contents or only did so sometimes, and only 20% said they always did. When we asked if they fulfilled the contents they had planned, 82.3% indicated that they did. One significant piece of information was that students prepared a calendar with times and days; 83% indicated that they sometimes or never did this, and 90% answered they barely fulfilled the calendar they had prepared.

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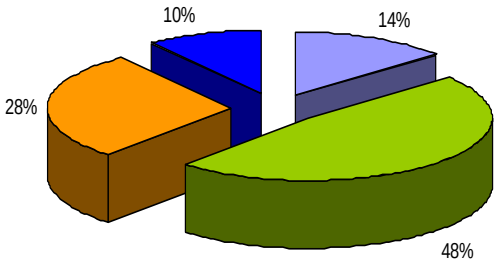

Figure 01. Planning time

One important question was knowing when they studied; 28.7% stated they had studied since the start of the academic year, unlike 71.3% who indicated they only studied when exams were near. However, 42% indicated that they studied on a daily basis and only 18% did so at weekends (Table I). As regards the time they spent studying, only 7.4% prepared all the subjects in the same way, as opposed to 92.6% who prepared them according to exam dates. Finally, 73.7% said they did not get up when they had to study and 75.1% indicated that they did not normally feel tired.

Table 01. Days of the weeks when students study

Days of the week	**Percentage**
Every day	42.7%
Monday to Friday	38.8%
Weekends	18.5%

6.2. Learning strategies

Regarding the learning strategies that students use when studying, it is worth stressing that they do not relate subject contents with other subjects (82.4%), nor do they extend information with complementary bibliography (95.9%). Over half the students stated they did not have all the necessary information and materials, and they did not tend to do a first reading. It is noteworthy that 32% of the students did not underline anything in the study material. Finally, 94.1% of the students indicated that they did not make the conceptual maps of each subject matter, while 79.4% recognised that they did not consult any encyclopaedia or dictionary when they did not understand something (Table II).

Table 02. Learning strategies

	YES	**NO**
When studying, I relate the subject contents with other subjects	17.6%	82.4%
I extend information with complementary bibliography	**4.1%**	**95.9%**
When studying, I have all the necessary information and materials	56%	44%
Before studying in-depth, I tend to do some superficial reading	**55.9%**	**44.1%**
I underline the study material	68.1%	31.9%
I outline the material to study	**51.6%**	**48.4%**
I use lots of words when outlining	13.3%	86.7%

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I summarise the themes to study	**59%**	**41%**
I make conceptual maps of the subject themes to study them later	5.9%	94.1%
I consult a dictionary or encyclopaedia when I don't understand some themes.	**20.6%**	**79.4%**
I memorise notes for exam days	60.5%	39.5%
I change the way I study for an exam or test	**33%**	**67%**
When studying for an exam, I consider questions that might be included in the exam	69.1%	30.9%

7. Conclusion

Regarding planning time, one significant finding was that one third of the students spend more than 75% of their time studying with no distractions. In parallel, they do not tend to plan their time, and those who do, almost one third, do not manage it. The same can be said for planning contents, as almost half the students do not plan contents when it comes to studying. This means that less one third studies every day, while the rest study only when they have exams.

In the learning strategies section, we can see some relevant shortcomings. It is significant that more than one third of students do not ask their teacher in class about any doubts they may have. They do not tend to relate the contents of different subjects, do not extend information using other bibliographic sources, nor do they make conceptual maps. For us these aspects are fundamental to improve students' learning.

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