REMARKS ON VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN HUMAN RESOURCES

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Abstract. *It goes without saying that in today's globalized and constantly changing world, the field of Human Resources is becoming ever more important. Thus, the acquisition of the accurate terminology in the field should be one of the ESP teacher's main concerns, especially at university level. The present paper aims at designing a seminar activity book centered on acquiring vocabulary for the Human Resources speciality in the `Dunarea de Jos` University of Galati which may provide students with a coherent, easy-to-follow approach to the most common words and phrases pertaining to this field. The issue of authentic materials in teaching vocabulary is also tackled, in an attempt to increase the communicative competence of the recipients. The paper contains actual examples of vocabulary-enriching exercises which proved successful in the seminars of the first-year students.*

Keywords*: specialized language, university teaching, vocabulary acquisition, practical applications*

Introduction

Unlike many modern terminologies, the one pertaining to the field of Human Resources seems to be of a later date (approximately the early 20th century), and thus not quite fixed in point of equivalency and translation, at least in case Romanian is the target language. The number of glossaries in English is abundant, but dictionaries, especially in Romanian, are scarce, thus making the ESP teacher's work all the more difficult. Nevertheless, a minimal amount of specialized vocabulary may be easily acquired by students majoring in Human Resources through the use of carefully designed activities that directly address their specific needs.

Thus, the ESP teacher has to make do with the limited resources available at the present moment, or produce his/her own materials to use in the English classes taught to Human Resources students. As at university level the rules of general English and a minimal knowledge of grammar are supposed to be relatively well-known, the main focus lies on vocabulary acquisition. The latter is generally deemed as more approachable by students, which is a motivation-increasing factor in the learning process, but it should also be supported by a number of other factors pertaining to their own specific needs, such as the relevance of the information provided in class for their future job description, the requirements of the final examination, etc. It is certainly undeniable that the lexical component of linguistic instruction is crucial in gaining full linguistic competence, as shown by Chacón-Beltrán et al. (2010) and Laufer (1998). On the other hand, teachers and students alike should be aware that unlike grammar which is seen as a confined set of rules, vocabulary is an open-ended system which poses the most difficult problem to learners (Schmitt 30). Mastering the vocabulary of the target language is a direct indicator of the linguistic competence of the learners, as "vocabulary has a crucial role in both the receptive and productive skills associated with effective communication" (Nyikos and Fan 251). Thus, it is only natural that the teacher be interested in endowing the students with the lexical resources necessary to ensure their relative autonomy in the jargon of their future field of activity and thus maximize their employability subsequent to graduation.

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Syllabus design in specialized fields

It is no easy feat to design a balanced and effective syllabus that students could integrate in their seminar activities in order to help them acquire the most important terms and collocations they are likely to encounter in specialized texts during the university, and later on through their future career. As a valuable tool for active learning, a well-structured syllabus would need to meet both the students' and the teacher's expectations in point of the progress made and the actual results obtained at the end of the term. As the group of students taught, although heterogeneous, may be considered as mainly consisting of young and medium-aged adults, it is useful, according to Hulstijn (215), to empower them by making them responsible for their own vocabulary learning; thus, they should discuss their expectations related to their learning prior to and during their seminar activities, take regular tests in order to evaluate the progress made, compare the results obtained to what the students expected at the beginning, and last but not least, make assessments of their own vocabulary acquisition strategies.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the elements that should be taken into consideration when designing a syllabus are as follows: input, content focus, language focus, task, to which they later added the learners' knowledge and abilities, and the supplementary teacher-originating input on the topic discussed that might enhance the comprehension and internalization on the students' part. All these elements should be carefully tackled when preparing the materials to be dealt with in class, without losing sight of the fundamental necessity to adapt everything to the learners' needs and their current expectations.

As the learners' needs take priority, it is our opinion that the best choice of syllabus type in the case given is the proportional syllabus as proposed by Yalden (1997), aimed primarily at developing overall competence; basically it consists of a main theme linking together the sequence of units to be taught. It apparently provides enough dynamism and flexibility to motivate students to interact, and supports acquisition by concentric or spiral learning that provides for the sedimentation of new knowledge. The central umbrella theme being Human Resources, it only seemed logical to follow the textbook definition in assigning a vocabulary-teaching unit to each component of the field, as follows:

- Unit 1. Vocabulary related to Recruiting, hiring, transferring, promoting, and terminating;
- Unit 2. Vocabulary related to Human Resources policies, procedures, laws, and standards
- Unit 3. Vocabulary related to Job descriptions, duties, responsibilities, benefits, schedules, working conditions, promotion opportunities;
- Unit 4. Vocabulary related to Work complaints and harassment allegations;
- Unit 5. Vocabulary related to Coordinating job posts, reviewing resumes, and performing reference checks, etc.;
- Unit 6. Vocabulary related to Management-employee relations, unions.

(adapted from https://www.humanresourcesedu.org/hr-specialist/)

Of course, there may be other types of organizing the teaching materials, especially in case the allotted time is limited; a more simplified version of the syllabus might focus on a narrower range of topics pertaining to morphology and not semantics, as in the following example, inspired from Wyatt 2005:

- Unit 1: Nouns frequently used in the field of Human Resources;
- Unit 2: Verbs and Phrasal Verbs frequently used in the field of Human Resources;
- Unit 3: Adjectives frequently used in the field of Human Resources;
- Unit 4: Word building and derivation;

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- Unit 5: Collocations and word associations frequently used in the field of Human Resources;
- Unit 6: Idioms frequently used in the field of Human Resources.

The materials used are selected according to their distribution frequency, without any claims of exhaustiveness and "objectiveness", since the primary aim is to provide students with the lexical basics for their future career.

It goes without saying that the teacher may also opt for any suitable combination of structuring criteria, according to the immediate and long-term needs of the particular group of students taking the course.

In point of evaluation, the partial and final tests are agreed upon from the very beginning and thus scheduled "of common accord": most of the intermediary tests are only diagnostic tools for the adjustment and repair work to be performed by the teacher, and the final test accounting for half of the final grade, in conjunction with the actual seminar activity carried out by the students.

Main difficulties in HR terminology

At first sight, what seems to pose the higher difficulties in the field of Human Resources is the uneven terminological development in Romanian, which does not possess all the terms and combinations in current use and prefers to borrow them as such from English, as it is the language used by multinational corporations that have branches operating on Romanian soil.

Thus, it appears that in point of terminology acquisition, the commonest method used is adopting the path of least resistance, i.e. direct loans from the source language without any adaptation to the target language, which may sometimes result in awkward Romglish expressions and confusion in getting the message across, especially for the uninitiated recipient (e.g. *C.E.O.*, *executive manager, line manager, panel interview, staff, head hunter, job sharing, job analytics, feedback, flex(i)-time*, etc.). This type of terms are however the easiest to teach, since they only require that the teacher should make sure that students use them adequately in specialized contexts.

On the other hand, the issue of "false friends", which creates additional confusion (e.g. *induction, company premises, facilities for employees, weighting*, etc.) seems harder to tackle. Normally, teachers should not only clarify their meaning for the students, but also contrast them to the "real friends" by means of equivalents in Romanian (for instance, *inițiere, incinta companiei, centru sportiv pentru angajați, primă de instalare/ relocare*), as well as suitable contextual uses in each case. As a remark, it seems that the technique that works best is to provide students with suggestive examples containing the problematic terms, asking them to infer the meaning themselves. As a fun fact, at the beginning they may also be asked to contrast the accurate translation with the "false" one, i.e. *inițiere* vs. *inducție/ inducere, incintă* vs. *premise, centru* vs. *facilități, primă* vs. *cântărire,* thus developing their critical thinking and helping them fix the right version in their long-term memory.

Another point of difficulty worth mentioning is the high propensity of HR terminology for euphemisms and metaphors that may prove hard to decode and adequately render in the target language. A possible explanation may be the very existence of the human element at the center of the subject matter of the HR field, promoting "political correctness" and the softening of negatively-marked concepts. Here is only a short list of metaphorical terms that students may need additional explanations for: *to make redundant, to let go (to fire), to streamline (to decrease the number of employees in order to increase efficiency), hot stove rule (a useful guide for corrective discipline that states that disciplinary action should have the same characteristics as the penalty a person receives from touching a hot stove and these characteristics are warning, immediacy, consistency and impersonality), job-hopping*

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(a practice of an employee in which he/she frequently changes jobs (within a shorter time), sandwich approach (an approach that can be used for informal talk under which a corrective comment is sandwiched between two positive comments in order to make the corrective comment more acceptable to the offender), etc. Like for most terms comprising figures of speech, the preferred method of translation in this case is the explanatory or paraphrasial one, destined to promote clarity to the detriment of conciseness and elegance of expression.

Furthermore, the abbreviations that HR jargon abounds in are unsurpassable in point of translation, the only option available being to be preserved as such or paraphrased: *BOS (Behavioural Observation Scales)— A method of performance evaluation in which directly related job behaviours are put on 5-point scales and the evaluator is to check on scales how often the employee was actually observed engaging in the behaviours; BARS (Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales)— A method of performance evaluation in which behaviours directly related to the job are arranged on certain scales and job performance is rated by selecting behaviours relevant to the employee being considered; LMR (Labour-Management Relationship)— Perceived degree of how well labour unions and managers in an organisation feel and behave towards each other; FIFO (First-In-First-Out)— A method of layoffs which involves doing first layoff of the employee who had been hired first; LIFO (Last-In-First-Out)— A method of layoffs which involves doing first layoff of the employee who had been hired last*. It can be remarked however that in the case of the last two terms the teacher may suggest the "rhyming" past participle constructions *primul-venit-primul-plecat*, and *ultimul-sosit/ angajat-primul-plecat/ concediat*, respectively, with the observation that they are not amenable to abbreviation as in English because of the lack of vowels, and also that they belong to a more informal register, not being included in specialized dictionaries.

In this respect it may be worth noting that even the consecrated abbreviation that gives the name of the field, HR, is preferred by specialists to the perfectly acceptable Romanian equivalent, RU. Even the pronunciation, though adapted to Romanian norms, may be subject to debate, as it is somewhat informal and "foreignized"— [haș`er].

Last but not least, students may be taken aback by the constant occurrence of phrasal verbs in specialized HR texts, even in the more formal register of presentations. It has to be pointed out that such verbs constitute a more fluid category, transgressing terminological boundaries proper, and thus may prove harder to understand and relate to the realities and concepts of the specialized field of Human Resources. Some examples may be: *to lay off (to fire), to put off (to postpone), to clock off (to finish work), to walk out (to stop work as a way of protesting),* etc.

In addition, one may even encounter typical idioms, which pose even more comprehension problems and require a deeper understanding of the metaphorization mechanism at work in the English language. Here are just a few examples: *whizz-kid (a young intelligent employee), happy camper (employee satisfied with his/her current position), idea hamster (employee with many good ideas), self-made man (businessman who has achieved success without help from others), empty suit (employee without opinions or reactions), rat race (competition for success in business), to get the boot (to get fired), graveyard shift (night shift),* etc.

Types of vocabulary-enhancing activities

As can be seen above, HR terminology is a rich terrain for teaching and learning vocabulary, the teacher making use of all the strategies available: meaningful associations, linguistic properties (familiarity, frequency, collocations, pragmatic usage), text type (contextual cues) (Nyikos and Fan 251-6). As the students are already adults, they are fully involved and aware

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of their own learning process, applying metacognitive strategies and self-regulation in order to achieve the best results possible in the time frame given (one semester).

In regard to the actual types of exercises used in class, the most proficient seem to be the ones focusing on contextual meaning, as they apparently quite conducive of providing students with the "wider picture" of language in use. Generally known as the "choose the right form" type of exercises, they are of average difficulty, providing a limited number of possible answers, out of which only one is accurate, and may be selected according to the context and co-text of use.

> *Choose the right word:*
> To be *successful/success/successfully* in this role you must have a clear understanding of your employer's business objectives and be *able/ability/ableness* to devise and implement policies which *selection/selective/select,* develop and retain the right staff to meet these objectives. You will not only deal *up/on/with* staff welfare and administration-centered activities, but also strategy and planning. HR departments are *expected/expectations/expect* to add value to the organization they support. The exact nature of the work varies *accordance/according/accordingly* to the organization, but is *like/likelihood/likely* to include the following […] (adapted from https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles/human-resources-officer)

The right answers expected from the students are *successful, able, select, with, expected, according, likely*, that may be elicited from the students by questions like: *What do you think the sentence should mean on the whole? Is it a noun/ verb/ adjective/ adverb that is missing? How can you tell this is a noun/ verb/ adjective/ adverb? Is the element part of a symmetrical construction? Is the element part of an enumeration?* and other similar answer-prompting tricks. This particular case may also serve as the starting point for additional discussions and practice on derivation, lexical and semantic families, affixation, and so on. Students should also be made aware of words that do not actually exist but have been included in the exercise just to test their discriminating ability.

The students have to rely on previous knowledge and make extensive use of contextual cues in order to solve the exercise, thus becoming aware of their own competence in English and gaining a better perspective on the remedial work that needs to be done. The instance above exploits a variety of grammatical categories, and additionally draws the students' attention on issues pertaining to derivation and the property of terms in context.

Contextual clues are also resorted to in inferential exercises of the "guess the word" type, which require students to match the words to their definitions. Here is an example:

Working hours

1. to work overtime	a. to work in teams at different times of the day and night
2. roster	b. a system where people can vary the start and end times
3. fixed hours	c. to work from home rather than going into the office
4. part-time	d. the salary that is paid per hour of work
5. to clock in/out	e. to work a part of the day or week
6. to have time off	f. the working hours of an employee do not

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			change or cannot be varied
7.	hourly rate	g.	to record the start or finish time of work on a special machine
8.	home working	h.	to do more than the usual hours required by the employment contract
9.	time sheet	i.	to take a vacation or leave
10.	unsocial hours	j.	a record of the numbers of hours worked by an employee
11.	to work shifts	k.	hours outside of the normal working week
12.	flexitime	l.	a list of who's working when and where

Expected answers: 1h, 2l, 3f, 4e, 5g, 6i, 7d, 8c, 9j, 10k, 11a, 12b.

Another exercise that compels students to resort to their metacognitive skills is the following, which requires them to infer the meanings of terms from the context, and subsequently pair them to the proposed equivalents in Romanian, as in the example below:

> *Find in the text below the following equivalents:*
> *competențe, domenii, a se suprapune, diplomă de licență, diplomă de colegiu, nivel debutant, funcționar, relații de muncă, a reflecta, înțelept, a instrui, carieră, alegere, potrivire perfectă, recrutor*
>
> *What are my HR career options?*
> An important choice to ponder as you study toward a career in HR is whether you'd like to be a specialist or a generalist. Fortunately, the skills you'll use in each capacity overlap, so you can move between these realms until you find the perfect fit. It's wise to explore all the possibilities. Those who've earned associate's degrees and certificates in human resources are primed for entry-level positions as a human resources clerk, HR assistant, recruiter, training and development coordinator, payroll specialist or HR generalist. Entering the field with a bachelor's degree gives you access to more options, including working in employee relations, HR information systems, training and development, labour relations or as a compensation or benefit analyst. (https://www.allbusinessschools.com/human-resources/job-description)

It may seem as too easy for university level, but in fact it manages to set in motion both metacognitive and self-regulatory strategies in the students, putting them in charge of "conscious reading" and adequate note-taking. The teacher's primary goal is to dissuade the traditional "word-for-word" type of translation, which sometimes yields completely inaccurate, even ridiculous equivalents in Romanian. In this case the expected answers are: *skills, realms, to overlap, bachelor's degree, associate's degree, entry-level, clerk, labour relations, to ponder, wise, to prime, career, choice, perfect fit, recruiter*; it is easily noticeable that the focus of the exercise goes beyond the strictly delimitated scope of HR lexicon, bringing forth other "problematic" words that students should include in their active vocabulary as trained professionals.

It goes without saying that cloze-type exercises of various types are widely used in class, being well received by students, who are already familiar with them from high-school.

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Here are three examples ordered in order of increasing difficulty, starting from guided cloze to free gap completion:

Complete with one word from the list:
people its workforce to perform experience on example
HR departments (1)……human resource management strategies. HRM is a strategic and comprehensive approach (2)……managing employees and the organizational culture and environment. It focuses (3)…….the recruitment, management and general direction of the (4)……who work in an organization. HR is also more involved in improving the organization's (5)……..by recommending processes, approaches and business solutions to management. For (6)……., in IKEA, HR shifted (7)……focus on values and cultural fit rather than skills and (8)…….in recruiting employees. (https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/corporate-culture.asp)
Expected answers: perform, to, on, people, workforce, example, its, experience.

Choose the word that best fits each gap:
Corporate cultures, whether shaped intentionally or grown organically, reach (1) the core of a company's ideology and practice and (2) every aspect of business, from each employee to customer to public image. The current awareness of corporate culture is more acute (3) ever. The Harvard Business Review identifies six important characteristics of (4) corporate cultures in 2015. First and foremost is "vision": from a simple mission (5) to a corporate manifesto, a company's vision is a powerful tool. For example, Google's modern and infamous slogan: "Don't Be Evil" is a (6) corporate vision. Secondly, "values," while a broad concept, embody the mentalities and perspectives necessary to achieve a company's vision. Similarly, "practices" are the (7) methods, guided by ethics, through which a company implements its values. For example, Netflix emphasizes the importance of knowledge-based, high-achieving employees and, as (8), Netflix pays its employees at the top of their market salary range, rather than an earn-your-way-to-the-top philosophy. "People" come next, with companies employing and recruiting in a way that reflects and (9) their overall culture. Lastly, "narrative" and "place" are perhaps the most modern characteristics of corporate culture. Having a (10) narrative or origin story, such as that of Steve Jobs and Apple, is important for growth and public image. (https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/corporate-culture.asp)

1. to with by in
2. effect effectuate affect infect
3. then thus than there
4. success successful successive successfully
5. bill statement declaration profession
6. compel compulsory compelling compulsive
7. tangent tangential tangible touching
8. such so much more
9. evinces magnifies increases enhances
10. powerful power empower powerless

Expected answers: to, affect, than, successful, statement, compelling, tangible, such, enhances, powerful.

Complete each blank with ONE word:
There (1)…….. a variety of terms that relate to companies affected by multiple cultures, especially in the wake of globalization (2)……. the increased international interaction of today's business environment. As (3)……., the term cross culture refers to "the interaction of people from different backgrounds in the business world"; culture shock (4)……. to the confusion or anxiety people experience (5)…… conducting business in a society other (6)…… their own; and reverse culture shock is often experienced by people (7)…….. spend lengthy times abroad for business and have difficulty readjusting upon their return. (8)…… create positive cross-culture experiences and facilitate a more cohesive and productive corporate culture, companies often devote in-depth resources

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(9)……. combating the occurrence of the above, including specialized training
(10)…….. improves cross-culture business interactions.
(https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/corporate-culture.asp)
Expected answers: is, and, such, refers, when, than, who, to, to, which.

The number of gaps to be completed should vary within reasonable limits, and it is our opinion that the maximum number of words to be reinserted in the gapped text is 10 to 12, as a lower number would fail to activate the students' metacognitive processes, while a higher number would increase the chances of boredom and demotivation on their part.

It is advisable that the teacher point out that the exercises are all based on authentic texts which use "real" language in adequate contexts, in an attempt to create genuinely communicative learning situations that students should regard as "true-to-life" and consequently worth their attention. The fact that the texts focused upon are genuine and not "manufactured" by a non-native (i.e. the teacher) increases the students' confidence and interest in the information provided, thus making it more likely for them to include the materials taught in their active, easily retrievable knowledge. It goes without saying that this is a quite straightforward manner of equipping students with the necessary skills that enable them to deal with the challenges of authentic materials in genuine situations of communication. Thus, the more aware the students are of the authenticity of the texts they are practicing upon, the more successful the lesson and the higher the likelihood

As expected, the final goal is that students become able to translate specialized contexts from Romanian into English, employing the words and structures they have acquired during their practical work. Here is a sample exercise that proved adequate to the students' level and expertise:

Translate into English:
a. Responsabilul cu resursele umane se ocupă de angajări și de concedieri într-o companie.
b. Pentru a asigura buna funcționare a companiei, departamentul resurse umane recrutează forța de muncă potrivită în raport cu necesitățile de personal.
c. După ce am efectuat numeroase renegocieri ale contractului colectiv de muncă, am decis mărirea cu 10 % a salariului lunar.
d. Nu știu care sunt principiile de recrutare ale acestei companii, tu știi ?
e. M-am decis să optez pentru această companie după ce mi s-au oferit beneficii mai mari decât la fostul loc de muncă.
f. Cine se ocupă de gestionarea statelor de plată și de dosarele angajaților ?
g. Colegul nostru de la resurse umane pregătește anunțurile de angajare.
h. Ai terminat selecția candidaților la acest post ?
i. Condițiile de muncă și fișa postului sunt mereu luate in considerare de potențialul angajat.
j. Salariul oferit de angajator nu este foarte motivant, dar există multe bonusuri, iar programul este flexibil.

When formulating the exercise, the teacher should pay attention to the adequate inclusion of vocabulary items, in naturally-sounding contexts, able to stimulate the students' activation of the lexical knowledge they have acquired up to this point. It should also be pointed out that there is more than one translation version, and the main objective of the exercise is to convey the message as accurately and naturally as possible. For instance, the terms targeted in this particular case were the following: *HR manager/ officer, hiring and firing/ employment and dismissals, smooth running/ operation of the company, renegotiation of the employment contract, wage increase, recruitment principles, benefits, former*

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post/position/ placement /job, payrolls and employee records, employment classifieds, screening/ shortlisting, working conditions, job description, bonus, among many others. All of them were previously taught and discussed in class, being considered as part of the students' active vocabulary. As stated previously, the number of sentences to translate should not be over 10-12, to stimulate the students' interest in the task and suit their normal attention span, without facilitating boredom and demotivation. It is quite obvious that the vocabulary items, although they constitute the declared main focus of the exercise, cannot be taught in isolation, but require the adequate manipulation of grammatical notions in order to arrive at an accurate translation in English. Thus, it may be said that this type of exercise provides a two-pronged approach of the teaching task, equally and simultaneously addressing the students' grammatical and lexical competencies.

Of course, these exercises are only a few examples of the vocabulary-enhancing activities that may be tried out in class. As it happens, all the exercises above were created and included in the seminar activities of the first-year students in Human Resources in the "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, proving quite successful in achieving the goal of creating a minimal "wordbank" to draw upon when dealing with specialized contexts. As a vista for further research, it is our intention to organize these terms and collocations into a glossary for HR, to be used not only by students, but by all individuals interested in communication in the respective field, specialists and non-specialists alike. It is our opinion that such a glossary would be a valuable tool in teaching HR terminology at all levels, mainly academic and on the job communicative situations.

Conclusions

It goes without saying that the acquisition of specialized vocabulary, especially in a rather new field like Human Resources, may pose a wide range of problems, which should be dealt with by means of a coherent, well-balanced, carefully designed syllabus. Irrespective of the principles used when deciding upon the materials to be taught —semantic, morphological or a combination of both— the most suitable type of syllabus appears to be the proportional one, with a focus on specialized lexicon as the main means of providing students with an effective communicative tool in the specialized field of their future career. Despite the numerous difficulties encountered in the terminology of Human Resources, such as the numerous borrowings and calques from English, false friends, euphemisms, metaphors, specific phrasal verbs and idioms, all hindering the students' vocabulary acquisition and communicative progress, there are various vocabulary-enhancing activities that prove highly effective in dealing with all these issues. The exercises illustrated in the present article were selected on the basis of their efficiency in class: inferring the specialized word from the definition, selecting the right form of the word provided, guided and open cloze, recognizing specialized words and phrases in an authentic text, translating specialized contexts from Romanian into English. The list is by no means exhaustive, and the teacher is free to make use of all the means available to improve the students' competencies. However, these particular types of exercises proved effective in stimulating the students' metacognitive skills, and at the same time took full advantage of their already existing skills and previous knowledge on the subject matter. The set of varied exercises should be accompanied by adequate assessment practices, allowing students to become aware of their progress and thus feel in control of their own learning.

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