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Do English learners from different countries approach ("compose") topics differently? A study report

Abstract. The paper reports on a study with over 600 respondents (EFL students) from 18 countries, concerning their personal approach to mastering two selected topics (*Clothes* and *Sport*). The hypotheses and the major conclusions relate to four facets – structure, lexis, correctness, fluency – which are presented in the paper as components to which L2 students need to be positively oriented to fully master any given topic. The study reveals structural orientation (within and across topics) to be approached least positively and, contrary to initial expectations – correct use of language being as much desired as the mastery of lexis and attainment of fluency. Most crucial empirical observations concern intercultural differences detected on the topical level, discrepancies between declared practices and indecisiveness in learning, and resignation from learning habits boosting control over the language learnt. The study is grounded in the concept of 'composing one's own English' as a personalised approach conducive to what is referred in the paper as formal control over it.

Keywords: Composing Your Own English, attitude to L2, personalised learning, language mastery/masterpiece, intercultural differences.

Introduction

The 'imprisoning" and "liberating" power of language (cf. McCullen & Saffran 2004) implies – among many other things – that our categorisation and comprehension of any given issues will proceed as allowed by our sets of mental lexical tools. This implication of what has long been known as "the linguistic turn", prompted by Ludwig Wittgenstein's statement "the limits of *my* language means the limits of *my* world", quite naturally applies to both native and foreign languages. In the latter case, if we operationalise this issue and consider it through the prism of "traditional" (meaning those frequently found in English textbooks for EFL students) lexical topics, such as *Sport*, *Weather*, *Education*, or *Health*, the above means that our understanding and handling them will rely on how we categorise them, break them down into subcategories into which we (consciously or not) assign expressions and words, hierarchize all the topical items learnt, which will result in certain elements being "closer at hand", more (subjectively) important and more easily employed.

This being the case, the learning of a second language as well as mastering any lexical topic is a highly personalised process. No wonder then that there has recently been much attention put

to the dimension of affect, which has been treated as more significant and extensively researched over the last decades (cf. Barcelos 2015:306), with students' belief that they have control over the subject matter learnt substantially aiding cognition (Arnold 2001:13). In the case of lexical topics, this control appears to be more readily attainable by students in that sub-categories can easily be recognised, named and systematically acquired (filled), so that learners' "affective tank" (cf. Dewaele 2015: 13) can be kept full.

Hence, the learning of a topic in a second language can be considered to be a process of individual construction, the character of which learners themselves can be either less or more aware of and, consequently, have greater or lesser control over it. At the same time this process involves, on the one hand, acquisition of items which, when put together, form (fixed) conventional combinations which can be viewed to serve necessary communicative acts reconstituting society (cf. Duranti 1997: 338), and, on the other hand, formation of novel arrangements of words and phrases which, distinguishing a language user from all other speakers, is an equally indispensable part of mastering a foreign language.

This two sidedness of the process leads to the major premise underlying this paper that there is a far- and deep-reaching similarity between the learning of a foreign language and the composing of music.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. The similarity lies in that in language learning, on the one hand, there are – from the perspective of an individual – "must-learn" topics (such as *Family*, *Weather*, *Food & Drink*) 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, and, on the other hand, "can-learn" topics (be it *Geology*, *Binomials*, or *Fuels*), which are less common and thus not expected to lie within every user's command of their second language. Furthermore, when arriving at the own highly personalised combinations of topics (in other words, when "composing their own English" (Daszkiewicz 2017)), they master topical vocabulary in accordance with analogous rationale: 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'. Technically speaking, as a result of the said two-sidedness within and across topics, language learners develop 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.

Materials and methods

The aim of the study presented here was to answer a question arising from the above, as to whether students from different countries approach this heavily personalized process of topic composition in a similar manner. The question appears particularly relevant to English, which, being a global language, is, as Brutt-Griffler notes, characterised by sufficient adaptability and changeability for its users from different continents to express their (personal) experience (Cf. Brutt-Griffler 2002:ix). It can be observed that while the making of comparisons between individual arrangements ("compositions") across and within topics is too far-fetched a challenge (and far from being needed if the personal approach to language is to be cherished), there are criteria that can be used for a comparison, namely (the students' attitude to) structure, lexis, correctness and fluency (see e.g. MacGowan-Gilhooly 1991:73). It was assumed in the study that the choice of the four facets may be considered well-suited for at least two reasons: first, attention to all the four facets can be argued to be a prerequisite for full mastery of a language, to characterise the ideal approach to language studies, and to enable learners to construct their own cohesive whole ("masterpiece"); second, the four facets, when considered on two spectrums, 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 must also be added here that the facet referred to here as "structure" has been understood more broadly than its traditional equation with "grammar", that is it relates to a learner's overall awareness of what structural issues the learning of a particular topic consists of, and so their knowledge of what sub-issues occur to be acquired on the path to developing one's own cohesive whole (intralanguage) (hence in the study such statements have been used as "I look for order..", "I classify expressions…", "I recognise a hierarchy.." etc.). Yet, (the traditionally understood "grammar" remains an integral component here, which, accordingly, is viewed in the study as complementary to the facet of lexis. The two dimensions can, for the sake of clarity, be presented graphically, with learners either striking a balance between the two extremes of the two spectrums (favourable attitude) or being inclined to favour one of the two extremes (undesirable attitude):

STRUCTURE ← - - - - - - - - - - - → LEXIS
CORRECTNESS ← - - - - - - - - - - - → FLUENCY

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

Hence, the said key **problem** addressed in the study can now be operationalised as reading: to what extent do language learners from different countries show distinct attitudes to (topical) structure,

lexis, correctness and fluency during their topic composition? With English serving as today's omnipresent lingua franca and "a taken-for-granted" component of world curriculum models (Cf. Cha & Ham 2008:325), and with communicative competence being commonly prioritised over linguistic competence, it was **hypothesised** prior to the study that in different countries language learners would value (the right-most ends of the spectrums, i.e.) lexis and fluency over (the left-most) structural orientation and correctness. In other words, it was anticipated that EFL learners would prove to treat the former as if they were more conducive to their complete mastery of a topic and to take a more "relaxed" (detrimental) attitude to the latter, which can be presented as follows:

STRUCTURE - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - →

LEXIS - - - - - - - - - - - - - →   COMPLETE

CORRECTNESS - - - - - - - - - - - - →   MASTERY

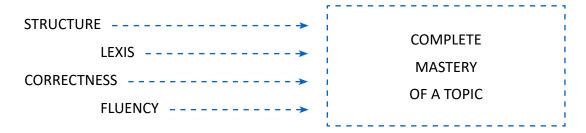FLUENCY - - - - - - - - - - - - →   OF A TOPIC

Figure 2. (Anticipated) perception of the relationship
between four facets and language mastery

Therefore, as presented in Figure 2, it was assumed prior to the study (in such an implicit degree that the author himself did not actually realise the assumption till this very text has been reviewed) that students would demonstrate comparable preferences in their attitudes to the four facets, which may be presented as the study's null hypothesis reading "there are no differences in the way learners from different countries compose topics" (a reviewer's insightful suggestion).

With the respondents' overall approach assumed to show no significant differences, the four-faceted model gave rise to four major premises leading on to four respective complementary hypotheses pertaining to language learners' attitudes and beliefs only (not behaviours, the study of which would require a different methodology and which lies beyond the scope of this paper), namely:

- on the basis of Premise 1 that, on the whole, learners from different countries will regard language practices improving their lexis and fluency of speech as more significant and needed than those focused on the build-up of topics and correct uses of language (regardless of how the latter may support the former and render learners genuinely advanced), it was hypothesised that foreign language learners value language practices enhancing their lexis and fluency higher than those improving their structural orientation as defined earlier and the correctness of the language they use (Hypothesis 1);
- on the basis of Premise 2 that the right extremes of the spectrums in Figure 1 are altogether subject to more systematic reflection on the part of learners than the left extremes (with correct production of speech being multifoldedly demanding (cf. Cameron 2001: 36) and engaging learners "in [more intense] fire of psycholinguistic mechanisms (Mota 2010: 226)),

which implies that language learners can be expected, for instance, to reflect on preferred ways of memorising vocabulary more than on, say, divisions within particular topics, it was hypothesised that foreign language learners, when learning any given topic, show more attention to lexis and fluency than structure (as defined above) and language correctness (Hypothesis 2);

- on the basis of Premise 3 that reflection on language-learning practices retains a universal character, meaning that, generally speaking, it does not pertain to separate topics but rather to language as a whole, which means that language learners will have more to say about general behaviours appearing commonsensical to them (e.g. checking words before using them, selection of sources, speaking fast without inhibitions etc.) rather than about topic-oriented ones, it was hypothesised that foreign language learners demonstrate more certainty with regards to universal language behaviours than those pertaining to particular topics (i.e. when surveyed, they would find items of a universal appeal less problematic to decide about than those of a narrower appeal) (Hypothesis 3);

- on the basis of Premise 4 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, it was hypothesised that foreign language learners favour such practices that universally apply to lexis and fluency over those enhancing topical orientation in structure and correctness (i.e. when surveyed, they would evaluate the former more positively that the latter) (Hypothesis 4). (A comment needs to be added here that the last two hypotheses both address the universal-topical spectrum, with the difference between them being that Hypothesis 3 relates to the degree of certainty (awareness, reflection), whilst Hypothesis 4 to the degree of desirability of particular language learning behaviours.)

The study was carried out with 606 **participants** from 18 countries (14 European states (342 respondents) and 4 Asian and African countries (264 respondents)), namely Bulgaria (10), the Czech Republic (3), Denmark (16), Germany (70), Greece (39), Hungary (20), Lithuania (19), Poland (34), Portugal (14), Romania (38), (the European part of) Russia (2), Serbia (53), Slovakia (18), Spain (6), and Iraq (44), Japan (46), the Republic of South Africa (10), Turkey (164). They were all university students whose common denominator was that English was not their major, but a foreign language which they studied throughout (secondary in terms of importance) classes as one considered potentially significant for their future professional life. They were between 19 and 24 years of age, and their level of English was estimated by their teachers as not lower than B1+. The respondents constitute a convenience sample, with no direct comparisons being intended across countries (in compliance with the said null hypothesis), but rather a relatively (geographically) spread sample being required to verify the relationships between the four facets in question.

In order to operationalise the respondents' approach to the four facets in question, a questionnaire was applied with a Likert-type scale reading 'Definitely NOT-Rather NOT-Hard to say - Rather YES-Definitely YES'. The **procedure** was that the respondents marked their position with regard to concepts associated with the four facets, namely:

- divisions, hierarchies, classifications, order, or combinations – associated with <u>structure</u>-orientation; the learners' approach was verified here with the following statements (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)

- memorisation, numbers of words, word isolation, short replies, counting words – marking <u>lexis</u>-orientation; the learners' approach was verified with the following 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)

- certainty, checking words, grammaticality, taking risk, character of language sources – important in <u>correctness</u>-orientation; the learners' approach was verified here with the following 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 <u>bad</u> idea. (15)

  I carefully try to choose sources which present only correct use of language. (19)

- speech anxiety, rate of speech, mistakes, contexts, social circumstances – indicative of <u>fluency</u>-orientation; the learners' approach was verified here with the following 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)

Notes on methodology:

- two parallel versions of the tool have been used, one referring to the topic of *Clothes* (completed by 367 respondents: from Europe (217) and Asia & Africa (150), and the other one – *Sport* (completed by 239 respondents: from Europe (125) and Asia & Africa (114); the choice of the two topics was based on the assumption that they are likely to fall within the interests of most of the respondents. In the administration of the questionnaire, they were free to decide which of the versions they use;

- as the numbers above indicate, the items pertaining to the four facets (all cited above) were put in an alternating order so that none of the four would be given priority over the other three facets; in order to account for "the fallibility of single items" (Dörnyei & Csizér 2012:76), the respondents' approach to each facet was verified with a set of (five) items, none of which was prioritised over the remaining (four);

- one half of the items have included topical references (i.e. focused on *Clothes* or *Sport*, depending on the version) and the other half – general (e.g. Item 1 is topical in that it names very specific sub-issues, i.e. 'articles, patterns, sizes', and 'disciplines, equipment, situations', respectively; other topical items bear explicit topical markers, such as 'dressing styles' or 'games', respectively; the general items are based on wording which can be applied to any given topic such as 'subcategories', 'context', 'sources', or 'mistakes'). The general items are shared by the two parallel versions;

- all the items are consistently viewed to be indicative of the respondents' thoughts on language learning (expressed both in terms of their beliefs, preferences, etc. as well as statements describing their actions); none of these items are construed as information on what the respondents' actual language learning behaviours are;

- the procedure resulted in 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;

- for the sake of the two versions' validity, each of the twenty items used contained a label binding it with one of the four facets;

- for the sake of the two versions' reliability, nearly all items retained the same subjective orientation ("I", "my") so as to evade sources of irrelevant variance (Niemierko 1999:195).

Results

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 (with the standard deviation of the mean in the former version (0.48) exceeding that of the latter (0.36); with the size of the two sub-samples differing, this indicator remains a better index of variability of the scores that the standard deviation of the total scores). The variance observed in the two versions of the questionnaires has been below 0.25, with the former version (0.23) exceeding that of the latter (0.13); the highest variance was observed in the sub-sample of 217 European respondents using the questionnaire relating to *Clothes*, i.e. 0.29 (which, considering the fact that this group was the largest of all the four sub-samples, is far from being surprising).

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.

Statistically speaking, 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 (with the correlation index exceeding 0,7), served as the major determinant of the credibility of outcomes. It is the consistence between results obtained with the two versions (the juxtaposition of four sub-sums pertaining to the four facets) 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 the 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 questionnaire components – 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 unfamiliar blends.

Responses concerning LEXIS, apart from the already mentioned intercultural 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. <u>Hypothesis 1</u>. 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 the 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 to 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. <u>Hypothesis 2</u>. 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 might be seen as revealing 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. <u>Hypothesis 3</u>. 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 func-

tional 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 the respondents' actual choices).

Ad. <u>Hypothesis 4</u>. 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 intercultural differences), the respondents demonstrated substantially greater scepticism or ambivalence with regard to the topic-oriented statements than those of a general appeal. The discrepancy 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 remain so unaware and indecisive.

Discussion

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 intercultural differences found in the research have proved it to be socially determined, too. Although intercultural 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 – correct-

ness. 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 (complementary) **formal control** over it. In other words, they prove 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 the 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 poses an obstacle to yet better familiarity with how English works and, as such, it 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 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 concerns the facet of CORRECTNESS, with regard to which Hypothesis 2 was disproved. It was found that the respondents care about grammaticality more than anticipated and value practices supporting it (despite not being strongly bothered by language mistakes made by others). It must be emphasised, however, that the questionnaire is by no means a measure of learning achievement and it rests on the 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 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 form 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 a 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:
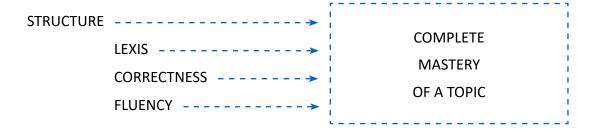

Figure 3. Perception of the relationship between four facets
and language mastery – as shown by results

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 which 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 intercultural

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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