# LEARNERS INDEPENDENCE MATCHING INDIVIDUAL STRATEGIES AND LEARNING STYLES THROUGH LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES ON THE INTERNET

**Aida GJINALI**
Department of Italian Language
University of Tirana
aida.gjinali@unitir.edu.al

**Sonila PIRI**
Department of Italian Language
University of Tirana
sonila.piri@unitir.edu.al

**Abstract**

Glotodidactics, based on the central role of the student, suggests that teacher select didactic concepts that lead to the improvement of knowledge of the language being studied. Observing students' behaviors enables the acquisition of cognitive competences about study skills, strategies and features in learning. Today, learners' independence is given great importance in the teaching process. In order to achieve this objective, the instructor's contribution is fundamental; the instructor must act to determine and develop, in cooperation with the student, the mechanisms and approaches, such as learning strategies, but also the selection of appropriate tools. The use of the Internet offers various alternatives for the acquisition of new linguistic inputs, respecting the peculiarities and personal strategies in learning. This study analyzes manners and objectives that can be achieved in the acquisition of the Italian language through activities developed on the Internet, matching individual strategies or characteristic features that are applied in learning a foreign language.

**Keywords:** *Learner independence, strategies, learning styles, internet, foreign language*

## 1. Introduction

Glotodidactic language research has increasingly focused on the development of learner-centered approaches, starting from the first definitions of student needs analysis to identify, according to specific needs: the contents, materials, and teaching techniques of a curriculum of second or foreign language. Thanks to the influence of science and studies on individual differences in learning, the scope of attention was then expanded to include the cognitive processes underlying learning: study skills, learning strategies and styles. The metacognitive aspect was then added to the cognitive aspect, to identify which are the most effective strategies for developing these skills. Therefore, the competence "learning to learn", which is one of the indispensable components of independence in learning and which finds its reason for existence even in the social, cultural, and economic changes of our time, is becoming more and more important.

Other significant impulses in this sense come from the development of social-affective approaches and from constructivism. Both place the learner in the foreground, with their self-determination in relation to their journey and objectives as well as responsibility for their learning. Social-affective approaches shift attention to the human aspect of the student in its entirety, that is, taking into account their cognitive, intellectual, physical, psychomotor, affective dimensions. Constructivism emphasizes the multi-perspective nature of knowledge perceived as an active construction that gains value by sharing meanings and uses technology as knowledge enhancers. Thus, the need that is most strongly imposed at the moment is that of an intentionally independent type of education.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Learner Independence*

The concept of independence is placed within a wider context that can be defined as "self-education", i.e., a model of learning in which the student works, alone or together with others, without the direct control of the teacher. In this context, we can distinguish different forms of self-education, in which both the level of teacher intervention and the space for student self-determination can vary (Mezzadri, 2003).

The most extreme form is independence, since the student manages the entire learning process (Holec, 1981), seen as a circular process of searching, receiving, processing information, solving problems and decisions, self-evaluation of experience, leading to a new demand for

information. Therefore, autonomy means mastering metacognitive skills such as: identification of personal needs; setting goals based on needs; identification of the journey to be followed and the most appropriate strategies to be adopted to achieve these objectives, specifically: planning, control, evaluation of the learning activity. (Mariani, 1994)

This is a slow and gradual learning process which should be properly supported and guided by the teacher. Therefore, in this context, not only the role of the student, who becomes the protagonist of his learning, (Mazzotta, 1996) but also that of the teacher, no longer a simple transmitter of knowledge, but a guide (Balboni, 2002) changes profoundly. Whether it is a real or virtual classroom, the teacher's task is to provide the necessary framework and, if possible, make it personalized, so that the student can build independence in learning in harmony with themselves and in harmony with a group, a community. (Mezzadri, 2003)

What does it mean, more specifically, to be able to learn in a socio-cultural and professional context that requires flexibility, in a society characterized by rapid change and constant evolution? It is not enough to put the student at the center, nor to undo the affective filters to build independence, but what we think is a priority is to shift the focus of attention from products to processes that underlie them, to identify needs not as content, but as individual learning strategies and features.

Therefore, the main goal of the teacher is to lead the student to awareness of their own way of learning: by exposing them to a variety of strategies and at the same time stimulating reflection on their strategic choices. Thus, they can be enabled to recognize and improve those that are best, adapt to their style, as well as experiment with alternative strategies typical of other styles, with the aim of optimizing all resources.

### 2.2 The Internet and its role in independent learning

Internet plays an active role in this process, being a necessary and efficient tool today to carry out language activities in the foreign language classroom. The Internet offers a wide range of activities, tools, and authentic materials for active foreign language learning. (Monti 2000; Piri & Gjinali, 2014).

It is clear that the use of communication technologies for educational purposes undoubtedly has many advantages such as:

- creation of learning environments in harmony with some indicators of neurolinguistics in relation to bimodality;
- favoring an active and experimental approach in authentic contexts;

- creating a meaningful connection between related disciplines;
- adding new linguistic inputs and establishing meaningful links between language and culture;
- offering new opportunities for communication, interaction, intercultural exchanges;
- encouraging collaborative work;
- increasing motivation, related to the satisfaction of acquiring knowledge through "fun" or non-traditional activities.

Some features of new technologies also seem to be particularly useful for developing independence in learning, such as:
- applying a learner-centered approach; (Mariani, 2000)
- promoting personalization of learning;
- favoring flexible and "multi-perspective" approaches to knowledge;
- providing opportunities for the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills, especially in relation to the processes of search, selection, reprocessing of information.

However, it should not be underestimated that these advantages cannot be obtained automatically by the simple use of technologies, but only on the condition that such use is included in a clear and coherent methodological framework (Gramegna, 2015). In the absence of a reference base as well as appropriate strategies of Internet navigation, there is a slight risk of cognitive overload, disorientation, distraction (Fratter, 2004). Therefore, from a didactic point of view, it is essential that the teacher should provide the appropriate support, which directs, albeit flexibly, the processes of search, selection, reprocessing of information and which provides opportunities to reflect on these processes, to reach a greater awareness of oneself, of learning strategies, of personal cognitive uniqueness. This means that, alongside the so-called traditional strategies of decoding and understanding texts, it is necessary to develop simultaneous strategies of exploration and critical interpretation of network activities (Pool 1997, Warschauer 1998, Warschauer and Healey 1998) cited by Mariani (2000)

**3. Methodology and instruments**

In order to work in the Italian language classroom with activities that contain elements of the culture and civilization of this language and at the same time developing students' awareness of their learning strategies and features, a didactic internet address

https:/ /digilander.libero.it/navigaroma/index.htm was created by two teachers for students with an advanced level of knowledge of the Italian language and it aims to promote the ability to independently manage learning through:

- reflecting about individual cognitive styles and learning strategies to gain awareness, to improve and verify their effectiveness;
- exploring alternative strategies for acquiring awareness about their potential and to optimize all possible resources;
- building personalized learning journeys centered on the student.

For this reason, the following cognitive and metacognitive objectives have been identified:

*Cognitive objectives:*

1) Exploring available materials, to understand its basic ideas.
2) Working with the text: analytical understanding of the content and structure of the text (connection and ordering of information).
3) Designing and developing a project: creating concept maps to group and connect knowledge between multiple texts, between new and previous knowledge.
4) Creative reworking of knowledge, creating written texts.

*Metacognitive objectives:*

1) Planning
• identifying individual needs in relation to students' goals and interests;
• establishing the objectives, route and work methods, tools, materials and skills required by the task;
2) Ongoing monitoring during the performance of the task
3) Reflection and self-evaluation:
• reflection on the strategies used and evaluation of their efficiency;
• exploring alternative strategies and evaluating their efficiency;
• reflection on the path taken and the results obtained; efficiency and quality assessment.

As stated previously, the tool of choice for this is a web address. In it, a virtual trip to the city of Rome has been created. At the "crossroads" of the city, the student can choose one or more entry points, which correspond to eight thematic itineraries: "Ancient Rome", "Medieval Rome", "Renaissance Rome", "Baroque Rome", "Literature", "Cinema", "Music" and finally

"Cooking". Each item is provided with hypertext links and a precise reference website for further information.

The student is invited to participate in a role-playing game in which they can choose to be one of the following characters:

- journalist: must write a report about the city;
- promoter: must organize a campaign to promote tourism in Rome;
- part of a group working for the local tourism agency: together with other collaborators, creates a guidebook about the city;
- part of the school committee organizing a trip to Rome: prepare the proposals to be submitted to the committee.

Alone or in collaboration with others, the student must design and implement a general project aimed at producing written and illustrating material.

For a more specific didactic process, several pages of the site present reading and writing activities, which refer to reflection pages on learning features and strategies (Reading, Writing, Planning, Self-Assessment). It is in this context that a metacognitive platform is offered: here the student can find questionnaires, guided journeys, proposals for activities, conceived as a support that can gradually lead to the development of independence through reflection and self-evaluation of his learning processes.

Starting from the desired path and following a personal network of connections, the student can navigate the site at different levels of detail: they can limit themself to exploring only texts or images; can carry out the proposed activities; can follow the whole path of reflection and self-evaluation.

## 4. Analysis and discussions

### *4.1 Implementation of learning strategies and features*

The goals described above relate to individual learning outcomes. First of all, through the analysis and reworking of the models mentioned above, two descriptive domains have been identified - sensory-perceptual modes and information processing modes - within which several features have been identified. However, the profile that we have tried to define in this way should not be considered as a rigid categorization: it is only about tendencies and not all of them are necessarily found in the same person, precisely because most of us have mixed characteristics.

Sensory-perceptual modes of the student (sensory channels with priority for learning purposes) (Mariani, 1996)

1) *visual - verbal*: prefers linguistic codes; learns by reading written texts; taking notes; making lists, writing summaries;

2) *visual - non-verbal*: prefers visual-spatial codes; learns by observing, exploring and/or creating pictures, drawings, graphs, tables, diagrams, networks;

3) *auditory:* prefers to listen; learns through repetition out loud, speaking, listening, discussing;

4) *kinesthetic:* prefers to carry out concrete activities; learns by having direct experience of things (research, interviews, laboratory experiments);

Information processing methods (Mariani, 1996)

1) *global-intuitive* (cerebral advantage with a tendency to the right): favors an overview and contextualized processing of information; evaluates a problem as a whole, tends to summarize; prefers rich data; works in a global, intuitive, non-linear way; follows less logical paths, which can nevertheless lead to original creative solutions; tends towards "divergent" thinking, i.e. starting from available information to generate a range of flexible solutions; solve problems through imagination and discovery; makes decisions based on feelings, while the work progresses; can go beyond "duty";

2) *analytical-systematic* (mainly left-brain dominance): favors details, breaks down the problem into parts, considering them separately; dislikes too much data that can create cognitive overload problems; proceeds analytically, logically, sequentially, linearly; has a systematic and orderly approach; above all, the development of logic and consistency, tends towards "convergent" thinking, that is, it solves problems based on available data, starting from which it can converge towards a single solution to the problem; makes fact-based decisions and carefully plans all stages of work in advance; needs a clear and organized structure in which information is built step by step; tends to stay within "task";

As a next step, targets were rated according to the degree of compatibility between the required strategies and the cognitive trait tendencies described above. The goal is to understand which features may be disfavored at different stages of the learning journey and therefore which types of students most need to be oriented towards alternative strategies, typical of other features, more functional to the features required by the task.

The objectives were set out as follows.

*Objective 1:* Exploration of available material

*Features:* The presentation of written and iconographic material can be adapted to different perceptual modes. The large number of resources available in the network requires the development of particularly effective information search and selection procedures: from this point of view, the global-intuitive style seems to be favored, as it favors an overview and is open to flexible solutions. Moreover, the intuitive and non-linear character of its typical procedures can facilitate search paths based on associative links: this fits very well with the network-like structure of information available on the Internet.

Therefore, it seems appropriate that for the need of a more global approach, sensitize students with an analytical-systematic style, with a network-like and less sequential approach, with greater trust in intuition, with greater flexibility of approaches and solutions.

*Objective 2:* Working with text: analytical understanding of text content and structure.

*Features:* Techniques for highlighting key concepts and hierarchical information are varied and adapted to different sensory modalities: students who are keen on words can take notes, make lists, write short summaries, assign headings to paragraphs; those visuals can produce tables, diagrams, grids or use different colors for underlining.

Understanding textual structure, identifying and giving a hierarchical structure to information, on the other hand, require logical and formalizing skills that favor the analytical-systematic style. Therefore, it is necessary to direct students with a global-intuitive style towards greater attention to details, logical connections, accuracy of analysis.

*Objectives 3:* a) Design and development of a project b) Planning and control

Although linguistic codes (such as lists of concepts or keywords, descriptions, numbered lists) cannot be ruled out by default, the most effective representations of knowledge are concept maps, which use visual-spatial codes: students can be exposed to this verbal meaning. The characteristic of active experience can also include students who have kinesthetic characteristics.

The creation of conceptual maps can be achieved through different journeys such as global-intuitive and analytical-systematic. However, it is a matter of reflecting, in particular, on the path followed and on the feature that underlies it, also with the aim of experimenting with different strategies typical of other features. In particular, the student with global-intuitive features should verify the logic of the connections made; on the other hand, the analytical-

systematic student should be encouraged towards forms of divergent thought (to verify other hypotheses, to expand the network of connections).

As for the ability to plan, it is one of the strengths of the analytical-systematic student, however even the global-intuitive student can use their ability to generate a range of possible solutions. Therefore, students with a global-intuitive style should be oriented towards more careful thinking and planning. Those with an analytical-systematic style may reflect on the benefits of greater flexibility.

*Objective 4:* Creative reworking of knowledge

The creative aspect of reprocessing can facilitate different sensory modalities: the student who prefers words will tend to produce written texts, the one who prefers visuals can also use pictures, drawings, graphic tools, etc. Since the path followed in the Internet address aims at the completion of a project, the student who prefers movement can appreciate the experimental character of this activity.

Considering the freedom to decide on the way of working, no feature seems to be particularly favored; instead, it may be appropriate to encourage a more attentive approach to the mechanisms of textual coherence and cohesion in the global-intuitive student and greater creativity in the analytical-systematic student.

## 5. Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the project presented on this website seems to fit a variety of cognitive features.

From a sensory-perceptual point of view, the multimedia component facilitates approaches based on different modalities, especially verbal and visual ones. Also, this project with active and experimental features is also suitable for students with a preference for movement.

From the point of view of information processing methods, the global-intuitive style can be based more on the hypermedia component and the network-like structure of information; another strong point can be the flexibility of approaches and solutions, a necessary requirement not only to improve learning, but in general to respond convincingly to the needs presented by today's society. The student with analytical-systematic features is evaluated by all logical operations that are based on text analysis, design and planning.

The task-oriented and problem-solving nature of the project activities proposed on this website, as well as the practical examples of strategies in well-oriented activities, can meet the needs

and inclinations of more pragmatic and action-oriented students. On the other hand, those who mainly prefer to observe typical patterns and procedures to build a general idea can find in the reflection pages theoretical guidance and general frames of reference that they may need before moving on to the operational part of the project.

On a more general level, it can be observed that the structuring of the website respects the indications of neurolinguistics on the principles of bimodality. It also proposes an active and experiential approach to learning, that is, based on doing and reflecting on the activities that take place. This procedure also favors a flexible and multi-perspective approach to knowledge. Finally, a significant element is the link between linguistic-methodological reflection and the approach to Italian culture.

**References**

Balboni, P.E. (2002). Le sfide di babele, Utet Libreria,Torino

Celentin, P. (2000). Autonomia e supporti informatici e telematici nell'insegnamento dell'italiano a stranieri. In *La formazione di base del docente di italiano per stranieri*, (Ed.) Dolci, R. & Celentin, P. Bonacci editore, Roma

Fratter, I. (2004). Tecnologie per l'insegnamento delle lingue, Carocci editore, Roma

Gramegna, B. (2012) Il World Wide Web nella lezione di lingua: il ruolo del docente di LS/L2. In *Tecnologie e didattica delle lingue. Teorie risorse sperimentazioni*, Caon, F. & Serragiotto, G. Utet Universita'. Novara, pp. 95-102

Holec, H. (1981). Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning, OUP Oxford

Mariani, L. (1994). I fili di un discorso sull'autonomia. In *L'autonomia nell'apprendimento linguistico.* Mariani, L. (ed.) Quaderni del Lend/8, pp. 1-18

Mariani, L. (1996). Investigating learning styles, Perspectives, a Journal of TESOL – Italy Vol. XXI, No. 2/Vol. XXII, No. 1, Spring, https://www.learningpaths.org/papers/paperstyles.htm

Mariani, L. (2000). Dimmi come 'navighi' e ti dirò chi sei": multimedialità, stili di apprendimento, vecchie e nuove strategie. Lingua e Nuova Didattica, XXIX, No. 1, February, https://www.academia.edu/63471197/Dimmi_comenavighie_ti_dir%C3%B2_chi_sei_multimedialit%C3%A0_stili_di_apprendimento_vecchie_e_nuove_strategie

Mazzotta, P. (1996). Strategie di apprendimento linguistico e autonomia dello studente. Adriatica, Bari.

Mezzadri, M (2003). I ferri del mestiere. (Auto)formazione per l'insegnante di lingue. Guerra Edizioni, Perugia

Sturtridge, G. (1994). Si puo' educare all'autonomia? La conoscenza della metodologia didattica come strumento per l'autonomia del discente. In *L'autonomia nell'apprendimento linguistico.* Mariani, L. (ed.) Quaderni del Lend/8, pp. 1-18.

Mont,i S. (2000). Internet per l'apprendimento delle lingue. Inglese, Tedesco, Spagnolo, Francese. Utet libreria, Torino

Piri, S. & Gjinali, A. The Importance of Authentic Materials and their Integration in the Foreign Language Class. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies. *3* (6), 27-30, https://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/ajis/article/view/4827 http://doi:10.5901/ajis.2014.v3n6p27

Ugolin, P. (2007). Proposte didattiche basate sugli stili di apprendimento (Modelli Vak e Felder-Silverman) in Suplement of Journal EL.LE, april, https://www.itals.it/proposte-didattiche-basate-sugli-stili-di-apprendimento-modelli-vak-e-felder-silverman