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SELF-SELECTION OF A UNIVERSITY COURSE IN PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

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Abstract. The present article aimed at identifying the university students' (further referred to as "participants") self-selection of an optional course in psycholinguistics. The participants' self-selection of the course was investigated by means of a structured questionnaire concerning their socio-linguistic background and a reflective essay on the topic 'Why I Chose an Optional Course in Psycholinguistics'. Data analysis of the participants' essays and the questionnaire revealed a set of variables involved in the students' self-selection of the optional course in psycholinguistics. Whilst several variables were unique to each individual participant, data analysis indicated that there were recurrent patterns in the self-selection process. Specifically, the data suggested that the following patterns shared by all the participants involved categories "interest", "future profession" and other categories respectively.

Keywords: *psycholinguistics, self-selection, optional course, university.*

Капранов Олександр. Самостійний вибір університетського курсу з психолінгвістики.

Анотація. Стаття спрямована на виявлення складових самостійного вибору університетського факультативу з психолінгвістики. Складові самостійного вибору були досліджені за допомогою анкетування та есе на тему «Чому я вибрав/вибрала факультатив з психолінгвістики». Аналіз даних вказав на набір складових, що беруть участь у самостійному виборі факультативного курсу з психолінгвістики. Хоча кілька складових були унікальні для кожного окремого учасника експерименту, аналіз даних показав, що процес самостійного вибору включає складові компоненти, які є спільними для всіх учасників, зокрема «інтерес», «майбутня професія» тощо.

Ключові слова: *психолінгвістика, самостійний вибір, факультативний курс, університет*

Капранов Олександр. Самостоятельный выбор университетского курса по психолингвистике.

Аннотация. Настоящая статья направлена на выявление переменных, вовлеченных в процесс самостоятельного выбора факультатива по психолингвистике. Самостоятельный выбор был исследован с помощью анкетирования и эссе на тему «Почему я выбрал/выбрала факультатив по психолингвистике». Анализ данных показал набор переменных, участвующих в процессе самостоятельного выбора факультативного курса по психолингвистике. Хотя несколько переменных были уникальны для каждого отдельного участника эксперимента, анализ данных показал, что процесс самостоятельного выбора включает компоненты, которые являются общими, на пример «интерес» и «будущая профессия», соответственно.

Ключевые слова: *психолингвистика, самостоятельный выбор, факультативный курс, университет*

Introduction

This article seeks to identify a range of variables involved in the university students' self-selection of an optional English-medium university course in psycholinguistics at Stockholm University, Sweden. The identification of the

university student's (further referred to in the article as "participants") self-selection of the course in psycholinguistics is based upon their written reflections on the topic '*Why I Chose an Optional Course in Psycholinguistics*'. Additionally, the participants' written reflections are analysed in conjunction with a structured questionnaire involving a set of questions pertaining to the participants' language use as well as to the personality-related variables. The main objective of the study is to identify variables involved in self-selection of an optional English-mediated course in psycholinguistics.

Self-selection is involved in a diverse range of cognitive processes as well as behavioural practices performed by an individual on a daily basis within multiple contexts, e.g. academic (Erten & Burden 2014; Gadzella et al. 1985; Kariya & Rosenbaum 1987; Kenny et al. 1979; Preckel et al. 2013; Rienties et al. 2014; Wirthwein et al. 2013), behavioral (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012), communicative (Dewaele 2010; Kırkgöz 2005), immigrant (Stupar et al. 2014), health and gender-related contexts respectively (Berger & Leigh 1989; Henry 2009; Kreyenfeld 2002). Previous research indicates the importance of self-selection of university courses by the students in the context of the increased competition for college students both domestically and internationally (Singell 2002). As indicated by Windolf (1995), "*Selection is practised not only by the university itself, since the students subject themselves to a certain self-selection*". It is suggested that self-selection of a university course involves motivational variables alongside with financial considerations (Singell 2002), family circumstances such as childrearing (Kreyenfeld 2002), employment objectives and career expectations (Gao et al. 2014).

Previous research suggests that self-selection is "*intimately tied to the 'ability' variables*" (Kenny et al. 1979:775), which are especially applicable to those prospective students who reflect whether or not they should pursue a tertiary education track. However, it should be noted that literature in the field of psychology suggests that characteristics other than ability may relate to self-selection, for instance dispositional tendencies of the individual and self-efficacy respectively (Ryan et al. 1998:603). It is reported that self-selection in the university context is regarded as a construct which involves attitudinal, goal-directed and motivational variables respectively (Gardner 2001). Additionally, previous research indicates that emotional variables exacerbate the university students' self-selection (Higgins 1999). Since emotions form an intrinsic part of the self-concept, it is assumed that self-selection is affected by the students' identities (Harklau 2000). In the context of education, self-selection is viewed in conjunction with self-concept, "*referred to as personal perceptions of one's own academic abilities or skills that are developed through experience with and interpreting the learning environment*" (Erten & Burden 2014:392). Alongside with self-concept and other concurrent variables, self-selection is involved in the interpersonal communication and, specifically, is believed to be both facilitative in interpersonal group dynamics (Chapman et al. 2006; Rienties et al. 2014) as well as dependent on the decision choices of one's peer group (Kenrick et al. 2003).

With the view of self-selection in the university setting as a multivariate and dynamic space (Kormos & Csizér 2008), it remains to be elucidated why university students self-select optional courses. Arguably, the dynamic space of a university setting can be characterised in terms of *Dynamic Systems Theory* (de Bot 2008) approach which views any setting as a space consisting of “multiple interconnected parts and in which the multiple interferences between the components’ own trajectories result in nonlinear, emergent changes in the overall system behavior” (Dörnyei 2014). From the vantage point of Dynamic Systems Theory, self-selection is based upon individual differences in decision rules as a function of adaptive design and random variation in trade-offs (Kenrick et al. 2003: 3). Factoring in the above-mentioned view of the university setting as a dynamic space, the present article is an attempt to provide a tentative outline of possible variables involved in the university students’ self-selection of an optional course in psycholinguistics.

Hypothesis and Specific Research Questions. The study was based upon an assumption that a formal description of the optional course in psycholinguistics available to the participants on the official web site would be insufficient to account for their selection of the course. Presumably, the participants’ self-selection of the optional course in psycholinguistics would involve a range of complex and unique variables which motivated their choices of selecting the course. Following previous research (Willis & Rosen 1978; Windolf 1995), it was assumed that those variables were randomly distributed among the participants according to their cognitive abilities, tastes, perceptions and expectations that affected their self-selection of the course in psycholinguistics. It was hypothesised that whilst some of the variables involved in self-selection would be unique to each individual participant, there would be patterns of self-selection that would be common to all the participants. Following the hypothesis, the following research specific research questions were formulated:

- Would self-selection of an optional course in psycholinguistics be critically dependent of the course description provided to the participants by the university before their enrollment in the respective course?
- Would the students’ self-selection of an optional course in psycholinguistics involve variables unique to each individual participant or would there be observable patterns involved in self-selection?

Methods

Participants. 12 participants (four males and eight females respectively, M age = 23y.o.) were recruited at Stockholm University, Sweden to participate in the study. All the participants were enrolled in the optional course in psycholinguistics offered at the Department of English at Stockholm University, Sweden. The course in psycholinguistics was administered in English and was an optional course to all the participants. Eight participants reported Swedish as their first language (L1), three participants were early balanced bilinguals and one participant reported English as her L1. All the participants identified their level of the English language proficiency as advanced. The participants’ real names were coded to ensure

confidentiality. The codes F1-F8 were used to code female participants, whilst code names M9-M12 were employed to anonymisemale participants.

Materials. The materials of the present study involved i) a structured questionnaire with a range of questions pertaining the participants’ socio-linguistic and personal background; ii) the official description of the course in psycholinguistics available to the participants at the official student portal of Stockholm University, Sweden; iii) reflective essays on the topic ‘*Why I Chose an Optional Course in Psycholinguistics*’ written by the participants.

The participants were instructed to answer all the questions in the structured questionnaire distributed to the participants by the experimenter. Then the participants were asked to write a one page (A4 format, 12 points in Times New Roman with 1.5 spacing) reflective essay on the topic ‘*Why I Chose an Optional Course in Psycholinguistics*’. The participants’ reflective essays and questionnaires respectively were computer-coded and analysed in SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Figures in the present articles were drawn in Microsoft Excel.

The study

Data analysis in SPSS yielded the following findings summarised in Table 1 and Table 2 below:

Table 1

The questionnaire data

Participants’ personality and socio-linguistic background	N participants
Swedish L1	8
English L1	1
Early balanced bilinguals	3
Reported advanced level of English proficiency	12
Reported problems with English syntax	2
Reported problems with academic writing in English	3
Reported problems with oral presentation in English	0
Reported preference for English literature	3
Reported preference for English linguistics	9
Reported instances of speech disorders (personal/in family)	5
Reported to have read the course description on the web	12

Table 2

The reflective essays data

Categories identified in reflective essays	N of occurrences per group
Interest as curiosity	9
Interest in the subject	4

Interest in the English language	11
Interest in speech disorders	5
Interest in psychology	2
Interest as in future profession	6
Interest in Stockholm University	1
Interest in personal bilingualism	3
Motivation to deepen the knowledge of English	5

Discussion

Data analysis indicates that whilst all the participants have read the course description on the official student portal, none of the participants mentions it in their respective reflective essays. This finding may suggest that the course description plays an epiphenomenal role in the participants' self-selection of the course. The results of the data analysis support the assumption formulated in the hypothesis which refers to a range of complex and unique variables involved in the participants' self-selection of the course in psycholinguistics. The present results seem to be in concert with previous research findings that suggest that individual self-selection of an academic discipline at the tertiary level involves "a complex system in which career, knowledge, desire for practical political change, life-style aspirations, and pure intellectual curiosity are mixed in varying proportions." (Windolf 1995:227). These complex and mixed variables can be illustrated by the following excerpts taken from the participants' reflective essays:

(1) *I chose Psycholinguistics specifically for quite selfish reasons. I greatly enjoy learning languages, it's something I do actively nearly every day, and over the years I have noticed certain phenomena, like cross-language interference for example, cropping up. It made me curious about how languages are stored in the brain and whether what I experience is shared by others, and whether there were techniques or methods to overcome the issue. For a long time I didn't know how to find the answers to my questions as I didn't know the linguistic terms for what I was experiencing, but the English Linguistics II course made me aware of all the research into this area and the Psycholinguistics course this year seemed like a great opportunity to learn more. (Participant F3).*

(2) *My interest in Psycholinguistics is motivated by my interest in Asperger's syndrome. Asperger's can affect someone's ability to carry themselves in a conversation. I think the reason I find Asperger's so interesting might be that if someone has that particular diagnose then it will affect the way we interact with one another and it will also force me to think about what I say and how I say it. Speaking to someone who has some sort of cognitive and/or behavioural disorder can be challenging but at the same time I think it makes us more aware of how complicated a discourse really is and how much we truly depend on implicit meanings, the ability to interpret*

other speaker's intentions as well as the ability to follow the other person's trail of thoughts. (Participant F1).

(3) The simple and short answer to why I enrolled in the course is because it seemed interesting. I also found that psycholinguistics seemed interesting since it takes on another approach to language that I had encountered before and that it might have the answer to many questions about how languages are created. For instance, before I took this course, I was not really aware of all the processes that I performed whenever I wrote, read or spoke and that there are reasons for problems that I might have had or difficulties in mastering them and that it is due to those being complex cognitive tasks that requires a lot of effort and energy. (Participant F5).

Whilst a range of individual variation is observed in the present data, it seems to be possible to identify major variables involved in self-selection of the course in psycholinguistics which are common to all the participants. The present findings point to the category “interest” which is common to all the participants. Subsequently, the category “interest” is divided into a range of subcategories, e.g. “interest as curiosity”, “interest in the English language”, “interest in psychology”, etc. as evident from Figure 1 below:

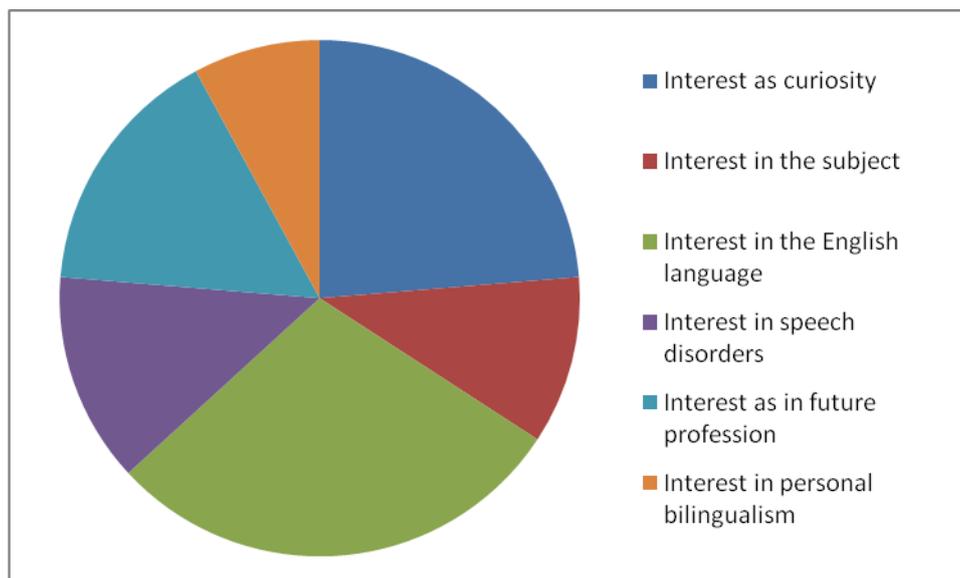


Fig. 1. *The subcategories of “Interest” reported by the participants*

It should be reiterated that the course in psycholinguistics offered by the Department of English at Stockholm University is an English-mediated course, i.e. all the instruction is conducted in the English language. Additionally, the course book “*Introduction to Psycholinguistics*” by Traxler (2011) is written in English. Hence, it seems logical and, perhaps, expected that 11 participants out of 12 mention their interest in the English language, since they rely on it in order to successfully achieve their goals in their future career, their current university studies as well as in their understanding of themselves. In this regard, it should be mentioned that “*Human action is caused by purpose, and this purpose has often*

been operationalised in terms of goals both in professional and everyday discourse” (Dörnyei 2009:15). Arguably, the participants in the present study have goals characterised by their shared interest in the English language which, subsequently, can be operationalised as one of their current goals. Obviously, there is a bias in the present sample, since the participants tend to exhibit interest in the English language which they report to have mastered on the advanced level (see Table 1). As noted by Berger & Leigh (1989:435), “self-selection bias arises because it is only possible to observe individuals making optimal choices.” Judging from the present data, the participants’ optimal choice in their self-selection of the optional course in psycholinguistics is the fact that it is an English-mediated course. Another possible explanation of the bias in self-selection in the present data set may involve the notion of Dörnyei’s (2009) *L2 Motivational Self System* with its domain-specific, situationally conditioned representations of the learner’s self. *L2 Motivational Self System* involves the notion of the learners’ possible selves with self-construals of the ideal self, the potential self in the future and the problem-related self (Dörnyei 2009; Lamb 2012). The notion of possible selves is based upon a complex interplay of current and imaginative self-identities including the engagement in compensatory effects that override specific limitations (Patrick & Hagtvedt 2012). In this regard, the data indicate that five participants report instances of speech disorders either personal or in their respective families. Presumably, the presence of speech disorders may play an additional role in the participants’ interest in the optional course in psycholinguistics which the participants may regard as a compensatory mechanism to override their speech-related problems, as graphically illustrated in Figure 2:

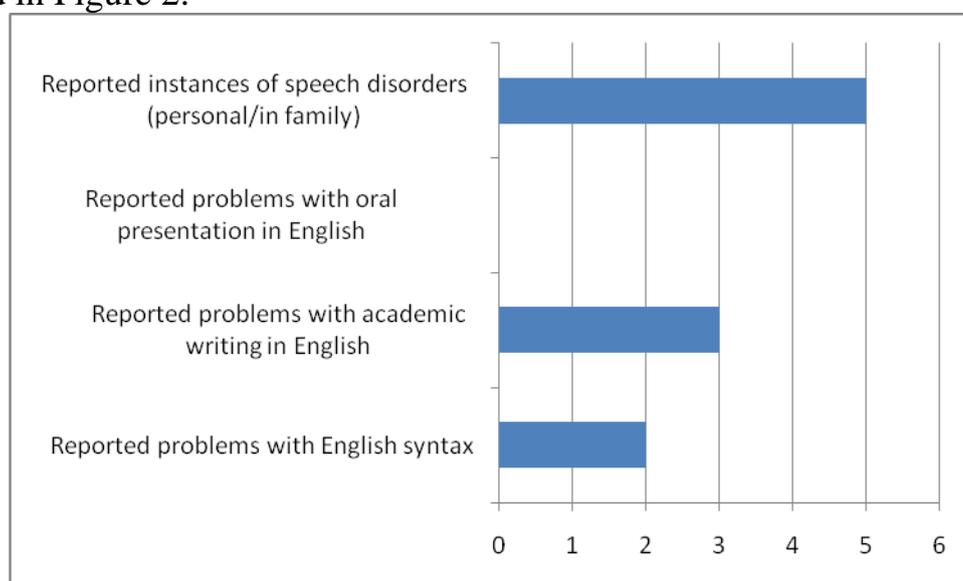


Fig. 2. *The participants’ self-reported problems with the English language and speech-related disorders*

Presumably, another variable involved in the participants’ self-selection is instrumentality. The participants’ professional success and career enhancement respectively are logically linked to the instrumental motives concerned with hopes, aspirations, advancements, growth and accomplishments (Higgins 1999). The role of

instrumentality in the participants' self-selection of the course in psycholinguistics is evident from excerpts (4) and (5):

(4)*I thought Psycholinguistics sounded like an interesting topic and after taking Syntax last term, I knew I wanted to take another advanced course in English. I have always preferred English to Swedish, since I was like nine years old. When I began learning it at school, I already spoke it fluently, though no one was able to explain why. My parents do not speak English whatsoever and I had not been abroad for any longer periods of time. So even though I am not a bilingual in any sense of the word, I feel like one and have always considered English as my preferred language. So I want to gain all aspects of the language available to me and this course seemed like another step in that direction.*(Participant F 7).

(5)*Another reason why I enrolled in psycholinguistics this term is that I think it will be useful in my career as a teacher. Once I have taken the necessary courses in pedagogics next year, I will hopefully be a qualified teacher of English and French. These are my L1 and L2 languages and I have a high proficiency in both, however, I have come to realize that it requires more than proficiency to be a good teacher. I think that it is essential that teachers also understand how language is processed and produced in order to be effective in their teaching.*(Participant F4).

It can be assumed that instrumentality, the desire to deepen the knowledge of English, coupled with the category "interest" in its multifaceted forms and other variables feed into self-selection mechanisms of any individual participant. The individual participant's self-selection is a truly dynamic space with a cornucopia of variables co-present in the participant's selection of the course (see Table 2). Whilst there are observable patterns in the participants' self-selection, these variables are dynamic and interact with different domains of the self-concept (Kenrick et al. 2003:3), thus leading to diverse representations.

Conclusions

The present article seeks to identify the university students' (referred to as "participants") self-selection of an optional course in psycholinguistics offered by the English Department of Stockholm University (Sweden). The participants' self-selection of the course is investigated by means of a structured questionnaire and a reflective essay on the topic '*Why I Chose an Optional Course in Psycholinguistics*'. Data analysis of the participants' essays and the questionnaire reveals variables involved in their self-selection of the optional course in psycholinguistics. Whilst several variables are unique to each individual participant, data analysis indicates that there are recurrent patterns in the self-selection processes. Specifically, the category "interest" and the compensatory mechanism related to the participants' speech-related problems form a recurrent pattern. Obviously, the present findings should be taken with caution, since the sample consists of 12 participants. The

present study offers an avenue for further and deeper explorations with a more substantial sample as well as initiates a pedagogical discussion involving optional courses in psycholinguistics at the university level.

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ДИФЕРЕНЦІАЦІЯ ТАКСОНОМІЧНИХ ОДИНИЦЬ АНГЛОМОВНОГО ДИПЛОМАТИЧНОГО ДИСКУРСУ

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Анотація. Англomовний дипломатичний дискурс досліджено як середовище функціонування термінів дипломатичної сфери. Для забезпечення комплексного аналізу дипломатичний дискурс запропоновано диференціювати за такими таксономічними одиницями як жанр, реєстр, тип текстів. Жанри англomовного дипломатичного дискурсу поділено на три