

LEARNING TO LEARN IN THE UNIVERSITY  
STUDIES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
TEACHER TRAINEES

Bachelor's thesis  
Miia Niemelä

University of Jyväskylä  
Department of Languages  
English  
January 2015

## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kielten laitos
Tekijä – Author Miia Niemelä	
Työn nimi – Title Learning to Learn in the University Studies of English Language Teacher Trainees	
Oppiaine – Subject Englanti	Työn laji – Level Kandidaatintutkielma
Aika – Month and year Tammikuu 2016	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 23 + 1 liite
Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Oppimaan oppiminen on ajankohtainen aihe ja tärkeä osa oppimisprosessia. Esimerkiksi on tärkeää, että oppilas tietää miten oppii parhaiten ja reflektoi oppimistaan. On tutkittu, että oppimaan oppimisen avulla oppiminen on tehokkaampaa ja sillä on myös vaikutusta opettajan työhön. Siksi erityisesti tulevien opettajien tulisi perehtyä oppimaan oppimisen käsitteeseen tulevana oppimisen asiantuntijoina.</p> <p>Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitin, mikä on oppimaan oppimisen asema suomalaisen yliopiston englannin kielen opinnoissa aineenopettajaopiskelijoiden keskuudessa. Kysyin, miten oppilaat ymmärsivät oppimaan oppimisen käsitteen, miten opiskelijat tunsivat itsensä oppijoina ja mitä strategioita he käyttivät opinnoissaan. Lisäksi selvitin, miten oppimaan oppiminen oli läsnä yliopisto-opinnoissa, mitä he ajattelisivat erillisestä oppimaan oppimisen kurssista ja oliko oppimaan oppiminen heidän mielestään tärkeää heidän oman oppimisensa tai tulevan opettajantyönsä kannalta. Tutkimus toteutettiin teemahaastatteluina lokakuun 2015 aikana. Haastattelin yhteensä kuutta toisen ja kolmannen vuoden opiskelijaa.</p> <p>Tutkimustuloksina sain selville, että kaikki opiskelijat tunnistivat termin. Osa vastaajista koki tuntevansa itsensä oppijana ja löytäneensä itselle sopivat oppimismenetelmät. Lisäksi, oppimaan oppiminen oli läsnä yliopisto-opinnoissa pääasiassa epäsuorasti. Esimerkiksi moni opiskelija kertoi suunnittelevansa opintojaan, mutta aihetta käsiteltiin harvoin luennoilla suoraan. Oppimaan oppiminen ei ollut systemaattisesti integroitu opintoihin eikä se ollut oppimisen suora tavoite. Osan mielestä erillinen kurssi oppimaan oppimisesta olisi hyödyllinen. Kaikki vastaajat kuitenkin totesivat oppimaan oppimisen olevan hyvin tärkeää sekä oman oppimisensa että tulevan opettajan työnsä kannalta. Johtopäätöksenä voisi sanoa, että oppimaan oppiminen tulisi systemaattisesti integroida yliopisto-opintoihin.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords learning to learn, university studies, teacher education	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION .....	3
2 LEARNING TO LEARN .....	4
2.1 The framework of learning to learn .....	4
2.2 The concept of learning to learn .....	6
2.3 Learner types and learning strategies.....	8
2.4 The influence of learning to learn on teaching .....	9
2.5 Previous research on learning to learn .....	10
3 RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS .....	12
4 DATA AND METHODS .....	12
5 LEARNING TO LEARN IN THE UNIVERSITY STUDIES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINEEES .....	14
5.1 The students' impressions of learning to learn .....	14
5.2 The students' knowledge of themselves as learners and the use of learning strategies.	14
5.3 Learning to learn in the university studies.....	15
5.3.1 Planning and setting goals for learning.....	15
5.3.2 Learning to learn as an objective in the university studies .....	16
5.3.3 Self-evaluation and reflection .....	16
5.4 Attitudes towards a separate course about learning to learn.....	17
5.5 The importance of learning to learn as a student and as a future teacher .....	18
6 CONCLUSION .....	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	21
APPENDIX 1: THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	24

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Learning to learn has a significant role in today's world and education. The European Union has set a strategic goal for the development of Europe, and education was mentioned as one of the tools to accomplish this aim (Hoskins and Fredriksson (2008: 7-8). Life-long learning is an important part of this educational target and learning to learn was named as one of the eight key competencies of life-long learning (European Commission 2007: 3). In addition, the rapid changes in the world and globalization set new requirements for learning. For example, people need intellectual tools to process information (Bransford 2000: 4-5).

Learning to learn is a complex concept and relates closely, for example, to metacognitive skills and self-reflection (Lindberg 1993: 4). According to previous research, learning is more effective when learning to learn is applied (Watkins et al. (2007: 19) and considering learning to learn in teaching also improves the students' school performance (Pol 2012: 223-224). In addition, the teacher has a fundamental role in the learning process (Brandt 1998: 3) and the students should be encouraged towards independent learning (Jaakkola 2000b: 9, 12). Thus, it can be argued that learning to learn is an important part of learning and the future teachers should be familiar with the concept. It has implications on their work as teachers and it is possible to enhance their own and their future students' learning.

In this study I interviewed six students who are all second or third year English majors and in the teacher training program in a Finnish university. My goal was to find out how the students understand the term learning to learn, how it is present in their studies and what is their attitude towards it. The paper consists of six chapters. Firstly, the theory part deals with the framework of learning to learn, the definitions of learning to learn, the different learner types and strategies, learning to learn and teaching and previous research on learning to learn. Secondly, I will introduce the research aim and questions. Thirdly, the data and methods are presented. The fourth part includes the analysis of the results and finally there is a conclusion, where I summarize the results, show possible implications of this study and give suggestions for further research.

## 2 LEARNING TO LEARN

### 2.1 The framework of learning to learn

In the Lisbon Council of 2000, the leaders of Europe have set as a strategic goal: "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (European Parliament 2000). Hoskins and Fredriksson (2008: 7-8) point out that education and training were stated as important means to reach this strategic goal and life-long learning is in key position. Life-long learning also affects the European Union's competitiveness, productivity and innovation (European Commission 2007: 1, 3). Moreover, new technologies, globalization and constant rapid changes require that people develop both professional knowledge and generic skills to be able to adapt to new circumstances. The idea behind life-long learning comes from the need that individuals have to develop their skills constantly in order to be included in the society, take part in active citizenship, to feel personal fulfilment and, especially, to achieve employment. To reach these goals, eight Key competences that support lifelong learning were set (Hoskins and Fredriksson (2008: 7-8). Importantly, *learning to learn* was named as one of the eight Key competences for life-long learning (European Commission 2007: 3). The other seven competencies are communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and cultural awareness and expression. Bransford (2000: 5), Jaakkola (2000a: 5) and Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 132) also acknowledge the link between life-long learning and learning to learn.

The world is changing and this sets requirements for learning. For example, people must be able to adapt to rapid changes and be able to communicate within an intercultural environment (European Commission 2007: 3). Bransford (2000: 1, 4-5) elaborates that life in general in today's world, especially, in working life, requires special skills. Hence, people should learn strategies and intellectual tools for processing information. It is more important to be able to find and use information than to possess and repeat it. In addition, there is a great amount of research and data about learning, and different areas of research and different methods are combined, which gives more accurate information and has implications on a practical level too. Furthermore, the focus has shifted from acquiring individual knowledge to generation of knowledge and co-constructing it with others (Watkins et al. 2007: 18). This also means that the shift is on knowing *how one learns* and

learning has to be strategic. Learning is happening in different contexts and between people, in relationships. Especially, in *language learning* the concepts of life-long learning and learning to learn have been taken as important goals and the rapidly changing world sets requirements to maintain and develop language skills constantly (Jaakkola 2000b: 8). Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 77) talk about the globalization of the world and how it offers new possibilities for language learning. Newcastle University (2011) suggests that willingness for more creative and adaptable curriculum and a more individual approach towards learning are reasons behind the popularity of learning to learn.

The new syllabus for the Finnish comprehensive school that will be applied in the autumn 2016 mentions learning to learn as an important objective (The Finnish Ministry of Education 2015: 15). However, it is interesting that learning to learn is not necessarily mentioned as a direct goal in three different Finnish universities' syllabuses of English language, even though they all prepare the students to work as teachers in the future (Opintopolku 2015, University of Eastern Finland 2015 and University of Jyväskylä 2015).

Learning to learn relates to the cognitive-constructivist learning theory that Jaakkola (2000a: 5) mentions to be a crucial part of learning to learn. For example, the student builds his or her knowledge on prior knowledge and experiences about the subject. Jaakkola (2000b: 8) explains that currently language learning is seen as an active process and during this process the learner forms an understanding of language as a system and learns how to use it. Moreover, Jaakkola (2000a: 1-2) points out that autonomous and self-directed learners are set as an objective by the Council of Europe. This is closely related to life-long learning and, therefore, achieved by learning to learn. Bransford (2000: 4) and CEFR (2001: 6) also mention self-sustaining learners as an objective. There is also evidence that school performance enhances when the learner's autonomy is supported (Watkins et al. 2007: 138).

All of the arguments stated in this chapter give learning to learn a contextual framework and highlight the importance of learning to learn in today's world. In the next section, the term learning to learn is discussed more in detail and also the themes closely related to the topic are introduced.

## 2.2 The concept of learning to learn

Synonyms used for the term learning to learn are, for example, ‘metalearning’ and ‘double loop learning’ and ‘paradigm shift’ (MacKeracher 2004: 17). Other synonyms for learning to learn are, for example, ‘learning to think’, ‘learning to study’ and ‘thinking about thinking’ (Newcastle University 2011). Watkins et al. (2007) use ‘learning about learning’ as a synonym for learning to learn. Also the term ‘learning how to learn’ is used by Novak and Gowin (1984). In this paper, the form *learning to learn* is used because it is a general term and does not have limitations, for example, only for meta-cognitive processes.

The following definition of learning to learn is by the European Commission (2007: 8):

‘Learning to learn’ is the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organise one's own learning, including through effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups. This competence includes awareness of one's learning process and needs, identifying available opportunities, and the ability to overcome obstacles in order to learn successfully. This competence means gaining, processing and assimilating new knowledge and skills as well as seeking and making use of guidance. Learning to learn engages learners to build on prior learning and life experiences in order to use and apply knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts: at home, at work, in education and training. Motivation and confidence are crucial to an individual's competence.

This is a rather comprehensive description of learning to learn and requires further explanation. According to Pol (2012: 224), learning in general can be observed from three perspectives: (1) the cognitive, (2) meta-cognitive and (3) affective perspectives. Firstly, the cognitive aspect refers to the ability to construct and memorize knowledge. In the definition, the part ‘gaining, processing and assimilating new knowledge and skills’ refers to the cognitive aspect. Secondly, the part ‘awareness of one’s learning process’ is the meta-cognitive aspect where the learning process is monitored and adjustments are made to accomplish goals in the current learning environment. Thirdly, the affective aspect can be seen in the statement ‘motivation and confidence are crucial to an individual’s competence’ and the aim is that the learner gains competence to deal with personal feelings. In addition, the social aspect of learning (Watkins et al. 2007: 9) is mentioned in the part ‘in groups’ and ‘making use of guidance’. However, Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 42) point out that the students need abilities to train their skills also independently, which is expressed by the term ‘individually’. Moreover, the European Commission’s (2007: 1) idea of life-long learning is fulfilled by saying ‘persist in learning’. The constructivist learning theory, which is seen as an important part of learning to learn by Jaakkola (2000a: 5), is present in the part ‘to build on prior knowledge and experiences’. As Watkins et al. (2007: 18) point out, learning also happens in different contexts and environments, which is taken into consideration in the section ‘in a variety of

contexts: at home, at work, in education and training'. The part 'identifying available opportunities' could refer either to the metacognitive aspect (Pol 2012: 224) or the learning environment (Watkins et al. 2007: 18).

Lindberg (1993: 4, 13-14, 18, 28-29) defines learning to learn as an ability to be able to reflect on one's learning. For instance, one should be able to choose different strategies for different purposes and be aware of the styles how the person processes information. This kind of monitoring of one's mental processes can also be called *metacognition*, which was already mentioned as an aspect of learning by Pol (2012: 224) earlier. Jaakkola (2000b: 11) also explains that to become aware of one's learning and thinking about it consciously requires metacognitive skills, which means that the person is aware of what he or she knows or can do and what he or she is not capable of. As a result, the person is able to ponder one's inner actions and learn how to self-regulate. This type of action can also be called self-reflection. Lindberg (1993: 63-64) points out that self-evaluation is an important part of self-reflection and that learning can be monitored, for example, by keeping a learning diary. Gradually, the person becomes aware of the learning process and suitable learning strategies. MacKeracher (2004: 17) defines that self-reflection requires, in addition to physical and social activities, mental activities and emotional responses from the learner. Therefore, the learner should develop a self-critical attitude towards learning.

Jaakkola (2000b: 11) elaborates that learning to learn is not only the actual learning skills or strategies, such as making notes, reading and writing an essay. Furthermore, learning is a skill that can be practiced. It is important that a person is aware of himself or herself as a learner, that the person has a clear self-image as a learner. MacKeracher (2004: 14-17) states that learning to learn is always present in learning and elaborates that learning to learn can either be a goal or an outcome in learning or a process. In addition, learning includes, for instance, critical thinking. Watkins et al. (2007: 19) talk about effective learning and learning how to learn is an essential part of it. Furthermore, MacKeracher (2004: 17) argues that the learners who are conscious about their learning and learn deliberately are more productive learners than the ones who are not. Jaakkola (2000b: 11) and Lindberg (1993: 4) state that planning of and setting goals for studying is an important part of learning to learn. Moreover, Lindberg (1993: 17-18, 63-64) mentions that by developing one's learning skills the person becomes more self-directed. Self-directed learning is also motivating.



To conclude, the concept of learning to learn is very broad and covers several aspects of learning. The next section will deal with different learner types and strategies, which arguably are an important part of learning to learn.

### **2.3 Learner types and learning strategies**

As Lindberg (1993: 10, 13-14, 18, 28-29) and Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 20) point out, it is important that a person is aware of himself or herself as a learner and know what type of a learner he or she is. In addition, every person has an individual learning style. Furthermore, both Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 20) and Jaakkola (2000a: 7) mention the importance of using strategies in learning.

There are numerous divisions of learner types. As Jaakkola (2000b: 14) points out, learner types are sometimes called cognitive styles. She argues that these cognitive styles differ from learning strategies because they can be learned and adapted, but a cognitive style is more permanent. In this study, learner types and cognitive styles are used as synonyms. Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 36-37) categorize learners by preferred sensory channel in learning and make a division between auditory, tactile, kinesthetic and visual learners. For example, a visual learner learns best by seeing and reading and by making notes during classes, while an auditory learner learns by hearing and by discussing the topic with a friend or a teacher. A kinesthetic person learns best by experiences and by doing, also the atmosphere and environment is important. A tactile person learns best by using his or her hands, and touching of objects may advance the learning.

Another way of categorizing learner styles is Honey and Mumford's division of activist, theoretic, pragmatist and reflector learners (University of Leicester 2015). This relates to Kolb's experiential learning theory and reveals how the person prefers to work. For example, an activist person learns by doing and participate fully to new experiences. A theoretic person needs background theory to understand the phenomenon, and facts and models help the person to involve in the learning process. A pragmatist person wants to see how the learned concept would function in reality and a reflector prefers to observe and think the matter from different aspects before making conclusions. Jaakkola (2000b: 14) discusses another division of learner types, which is the holistic-analytic distinction. A holistic person processes information as a whole and an analytic person divides the information into pieces. According to Jaakkola (2000b: 14), tests can make students aware of their learning styles. As a result, they are able to get an insight of what types learners they are. However, Watkins et al. (2007: 126) point out that the learners should not categorize themselves too much according to a learning style, but to observe themselves from different perspectives. Jaakkola

(2000b: 14) points out that there is no one right way to learn but students should be encouraged to find the methods that best suit them.

Hoskins and Fredriksson (2008: 24) support the above claim. However, they remark that it is important to acknowledge that learning strategies form a part of learning to learn but they are not synonyms. A strategy is understood as any thought or behavior that helps learning and often a learning objective is reached through strategies. Sometimes learning techniques, are used as a synonym for learning strategies.

The concept of learning to learn is also important in the language learning process. According to Johnson (2008: 149-151, 155-156), language learning strategies can be divided to direct or indirect strategies. The direct strategies mean, for example, memory or cognitive strategies, in other words the actual dealing with the language. The indirect strategies include, for example, metacognitive and social strategies, which relate to the management of learning more in general. In any case, the metacognitive skills, such as monitoring and planning, seem to be often present during the learning process and they are considered beneficial. It is often said that learners who use multiple and appropriate strategies in learning are performing well.

## **2.4 The influence of learning to learn on teaching**

As Brandt (1998: 3, 5, 7-8, 9-10) argues, the most important task for a teacher is to make students learn; therefore, teachers must understand what learning actually is. This means that educators should comprehend learning from a wide perspective. For example, teachers should consider the social aspect of learning, the individual learning differences, the physical and mental learning environment and the use of learning strategies. Brandt (1998) discusses mental strategies, under the concept of learning to learn. Therefore, learning to learn is a fundamental part of learning and he argues that it should be included in teaching.

Learning to learn is considered important especially in language teaching. As Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 6) point out, language learning is also seen as a lifelong process. Jaakkola (2000b: 9) and Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 6) argue that students are not able to learn everything about a language at school, therefore, they need skills to improve their language competence in the future and outside of school as well. Jaakkola (2000b: 9, 12) points out that, therefore, the learner should become an

autonomous language learner and this is on the teacher's responsibility. According to Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 20, 62), the role of a language teacher has changed from an authoritarian knowledge distributor. However, it does not mean that the teacher's role should be neglected. On the contrary, it is highlighted that the teacher has a significant role in the language learning process. The task of a language teacher is to provide the support and bring out the best potential of the students. Furthermore, it is important to try new learning methods and discuss them with others. However, Jaakkola (2000b: 8-9) also emphasizes the student's active role and commitment to learning.

## **2.5 Previous research on learning to learn**

Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 9-10) provided a course for English language students in trying to promote learning to learn and raise their awareness what language learning is by different exercises and discussions. As a result, the students were able to reflect on their learning and the learning process became more conscious. In addition, the objective was not to give straight answers but to explore one's learning. It can be argued that the students' self-knowledge raised during the course.

Jaakkola (2000b: 8-9, 15-17) explains how learning to learn could be adapted to the classroom activities in first foreign language learning in three different school levels in Finland: elementary school, secondary school and upper secondary school. As a result, it was argued that the development of learning skills was able to initiate already in elementary school. As the metacognitive skills developed, the students were able to take more responsibility of their learning and independently plan, accomplish and evaluate exercises. The teachers and students had felt that consciously pondering about the learning process was very useful and the teachers were able to invent new learning methods and gained new information about how the students learn. It was also suggested that the development of learning skills should be consistent throughout the school years and that the development should be systematic and implemented in the syllabuses to ensure its existence.

Pol (2012: 223-224) refers to a study where students took part in a project called 'learning to learn', and the aim of which was 'to speed up the self directed learning skills of first-year students'. The secondary aim was to improve students' effectiveness in learning. The emphasis was on self-reflection and applying study skills. The results were positive: there is evidence that the performance of freshmen university students improved in compared to the previous students during a year-long program. In addition, the ones who did not take part in the program did not perform as

well and, overall, there were less drop-outs. She argues that first-year students, especially, may have problems adjusting to a new learning environment and habits.

Watkins et al. (2007: 19, 131-139) show evidence that learning to learn relates strongly to effective learning. Especially, talking about the learning process and metacognitive skills were found important. For example, very young learners were “better prepared for learning (understanding new content)”. Furthermore, the learners’ view on learning expanded and the actual performance enhanced.

### **3 RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS**

As learning to learn arguably is an important matter, the future teachers of English should be aware of it and its implications. Furthermore, their own and their future students' learning would possibly enhance and be more effective this way. My aim is to explore how the students understand the term, how learning to learn is currently present in their university studies and what is their attitude towards the concept. My research questions are the following:

1. How do students understand the term learning to learn?
2. Do students know themselves as learners and what strategies they use?
3. How is learning to learn present in their university studies?
4. Would they find a separate course about learning to learn useful?
5. Do they find learning to learn important in their studies and as future teachers of English?

### **4 DATA AND METHODS**

The present study is qualitative because it suited the purpose better as I explore attitudes and experiences. Moreover, I wanted to examine only a few cases in detail. As Hirsjärvi et al. (2009: 160-161, 164) state, the purpose of qualitative research is to describe real life and to study the topic as a whole. Some typical features of qualitative research are, for example, preferring humans as sources of information and choosing the target group carefully.

The interview is the major method in qualitative research, as Hirsjärvi et al. (2009: 204-207) point out. Its benefits are, for example, straight linguistic contact with the interviewee and flexibility in modifying the data collection according to the situation and needs. Other advantages are that the interviewee is able to express his or her opinions freely and be an active part in the meaning making process. In addition, it is possible to gain more information than anticipated, and it is possible to clarify or deepen the information received. On the other hand, the disadvantages of an interview are that the interviewee may not feel secure or might give answers that are socially acceptable rather than his or her own opinions. An interview also takes time and must be carefully planned beforehand. It is also important to notice that an interview is strongly related to the situation, which means that different answers may appear in different circumstances. Dufva (2011: 131-134) mentions the interview as a great way to gain information of a phenomenon and to get the voice of the interviewee heard, his or her opinions and views.

The type used in the present study is the theme interview, which is an intermediate between structured and open interview (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009: 208-210) and Dufva 2011: 132). This means that the themes of the interview were planned beforehand but the actual questions and the order of the questions were not fixed, which provided an opportunity for a more flexible discussion.

In September I made a pilot interview with an English major student. Therefore, I was able to check if I could get answers that support my research questions, if the answers would be long enough and whether the interviewee was able to understand the questions. As a result, I got an impression of how long the answers might be and was able to modify some of them. In the actual interviews, I interviewed six English language majors who were also in the teacher training program. Four of the interviewees were third year students and two of them second year students. All of the respondents were females and Finnish language was their mother tongue. However, the interviews were conducted in English because their level of English as language students was considered sufficient and the answers were able to be interpreted as such, without translations.

I wanted to interview second or third year students because they are already familiar with the university studies and policies and have experience on different types of courses. Furthermore, I chose to interview teacher trainees in particular, because they may already have some knowledge of learning to learn, and they will become experts in the learning process. I believe that learning to learn will have a clearer status in the future; therefore, it would be important for them to be aware of this concept and to be able to support their future students. The interviews lasted between 20-40 minutes and they were conducted during October 2015.

The interview was divided into two sections: the first part dealt with the learner herself and the second part concerned the university studies. The interview questions are in Appendix 1.

## **5 LEARNING TO LEARN IN THE UNIVERSITY STUDIES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINEES**

### **5.1 The students' impressions of learning to learn**

I considered it important to find out how the students understood the term and what it meant for them. All the interviewees were familiar with the term. The following example illustrates the students' thoughts well:

**Example 1**

Mainly distinguishing between different learning strategies that one uses in their own advantage, and knowing what works for you in terms of learning and studying. And paying attention to the learning process itself, what's the fancy word - metacognitive processes of learning. I usually associate it with learning strategies, finding those strategies that work for you.

In most of the answers, the students referred to learning techniques and strategies when discussing the term. Furthermore, it was stated that there was not only one correct way to learn, but one must get to know oneself as a learner and find the learning methods that suit the person. For example, Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 20) also supported this view. Moreover, the concept was related to more efficient learning by two of the students, which means that it has a positive influence on their learning. Three students thought of learning as a process by saying that it includes different stages. The metacognitive aspect of learning was also named by one of the interviewees and she explained that the whole learning process should be monitored. All the aspects mentioned above are in line with the definitions of learning to learn (see 2.2). However, learning to learn is a complex concept and the students did not mention, for example, planning and setting goals for learning or the affective side of learning as part of learning to learn.

### **5.2 The students' knowledge of themselves as learners and the use of learning strategies**

In this section I will discuss how well the students know themselves as learners from their own points of view and what kind of strategies they used for learning. As Lindberg (1993: 18) and Kalaja and Dufva (2005: 20) pointed out, it is important that the learners are aware of themselves as learners. Some of the interviewees had a clear view of themselves regarding how they learn best and they said they had found strategies that support their learning (see Example 2).

**Example 2**

I am mostly a visual and kinesthetic learner. I like to do stuff when I'm learning; I usually draw and writing is really big part of my learning. For example, in mass lectures I learn nothing, literally nothing, if I just listen. I have to make notes constantly to remember and learn anything. Just reading doesn't usually help, but charts might help. Recently I realized that now that I started learning Italian, when I

am out running or walking, I go through words and structures and numbers. It is easier to do that while moving.

A couple of the interviewees described themselves by the terms *kinesthetic*, *auditory* and *visual*. This indicates that they are familiar with Kalaja and Dufva's (2005: 36-37) division of learning styles and can apply the terms in their perception of themselves as learners.

Some of the respondents were more uncertain about knowing themselves as learners and not satisfied with the learning strategies they used:

**Example 3**

I would say not that well. (...) it isn't really updated.

However, all interviewees were able to name strategies they had used for learning. For example, it is clear from Example 2 that the learning strategies also support the learner type: as a visual and kinesthetic learner, the interviewee draws, makes notes and movement helps her learning. One student also said that she does not want to categorize herself as a learner too strictly. This view is supported by Watkins et al. (2007: 126) by saying that the learners should not categorize themselves too much according to a learning style, but to observe their learning from different angles. The interviewees also used various learning strategies and changed them to support the purpose. The changing of methods accordingly was related to effective learners by Johnson (2008: 151). The following is an example of changing methods to suit the purpose:

**Example 4**

When I study languages I use memorizing: writing something down and say them aloud. But if it's some long text, for example, history, I just read and read and read, and underline the most important things, and read them again and read the whole thing again. Just repeat the whole system until I feel that I really got the idea.

### **5.3 Learning to learn in the university studies**

In this part I will present how learning to learn is present in the interviewees' university studies.

The themes discussed in this chapter are setting goals and planning the studies, self-evaluation and reflection and learning to learn as an objective. All these themes are related to the concept of learning to learn.

#### **5.3.1 Planning and setting goals for learning**

According to Jaakkola (2000b: 11) and Lindberg (1993: 4), setting goals and planning the studies were important parts of learning to learn. Only one of the interviewees said that she had not set goals for learning. The other five had some short-term or long-term goals. The long-term goals were graduation, future career, working abroad, fluency in the language and the ability to teach a



language. The short-term aims were choosing of a minor subject, getting familiar with one subject at a time, achievement of a certain grade and completing a course.

All of the students said that they had planned their studies. Short-term and long-term dimensions were also present in the planning of the studies. There was planning about the studies as a whole, for instance, when to complete which studies. In addition, there was planning of the next academic year. Moreover, some of the interviewees had planned the studies week by week or even day by day. In other words, the planning of studies included time management and choosing of courses, for instance. Some of them said that this was because they were organized persons and liked doing this, while others stated that their situation in life had required them to do so. For example, they had a family or they were working at the same time; therefore, they had to prepare a schedule to accomplish everything.

### **5.3.2 Learning to learn as an objective in the university studies**

When I asked whether learning to learn had been an objective in any of their courses, the experiences were rather different. For example, one of the interviewees explained that learning to learn had been dealt with an oral communication course for teachers and at an English history course where the teacher had given tips how to study for the exam and had also asked how the students usually study for an exam. In addition, another respondent considered the Academic writing course to be about learning to learn, more specifically, how to learn to write. Furthermore, learning to learn was somehow present in the teacher trainee studies. Three of the interviewees thought that the theme was not discussed as such in university lectures but it was related to the discussed subjects. Moreover, the topic was only scratched on the surface. The students were on the opinion that the theme was present in the studies, but more like a hidden agenda. Some respondents, however, had taken the HYVY course, which is an optional course for all university students. Learning to learn was one of the topics in this course. The HYVY course deals with the wellbeing of the student and the themes discussed are, for example, interaction skills, time management and emotion regulation. However, this course is optional and not all the students select it. Overall, learning to learn does not seem to be a clear objective in the university studies.

### **5.3.3 Self-evaluation and reflection**

Self-reflection and metacognition was considered very important in the learning process by Lindberg (1993: 13-14) and Jaakkola (2000b: 11). About half of the students responded that they had reflected on and self-evaluated their studying. The ways to reflect on their studies were, for

example, writing a blog and thinking back about a communication situation. Two of the interviewees said that after an exam they had reflected on how it went. For example, they had checked the correct answers after a book exam or had thought if they still had gaps in their knowledge about the subject. The other three students had not actively reflected on their learning, only if it was required. It is possible, that the learners understood self-reflection in a small scale, more like self-evaluation and not as monitoring the whole learning process.

To sum up, learning to learn seems to be present in the university studies indirectly, because most students, for example, planned their studies and applied self-reflection. However, the concept was rarely discussed in the classes directly and was not a clear objective of teaching. Moreover, it could be interpreted that learning to learn is not systematically implemented in the university studies even though the systematic integration of learning to learn in syllabuses was recommended by Jaakkola (2000b: 15-17).

#### **5.4 Attitudes towards a separate course about learning to learn**

The students' answers to the question whether they would find a separate course about learning to learn were contradictory. Here are two opposing attitudes:

**Example 5**

Yes, I would. That would really help me to get methods and how to read for an exam, what to actually focus on (...) how to make good notes and mind maps, planning my actual timetable according to what is needed and ways how to motivate myself.

**Example 6**

Maybe the first year it would have been (useful), but honestly I would probably think of it as a waste of time at this point because I already have two years of studying behind me and I have learned by doing already. If there was a course, I would recommend it to be the first year because then I was a bit lost and didn't know what to expect from the university studies. So paying more attention to the learning process might have been useful but at this point not so much. For some maybe but for me personally I don't think so.

Some of the respondents would find such a course useful. For example, the presentation of different kinds of learning methods, note-making and time-management skills would be important themes. Taking a more practical point of view in teaching and making the given subject interesting were also requested by one of the interviewees. One of the interviewees suggested that a course on learning to learn could only be some kind of an intensive course with only few lectures and then maybe a follow-up later. It was also stated by one of the respondents that such a course in itself would not make the student learn more but may give them tools how to improve their learning. There was a comment made by one of the interviewees that the actual course would probably be boring but

maybe leave the person with thoughts. In addition, some of the interviewees commented that it would have been useful during the first year or in general, because some people struggle with their learning. Pol (2012: 223-224) also pointed out that the first year was crucial considering the development of study skills. However, not all of the respondents would need such a course because they had felt they already knew which learning methods suit them best.

## 5.5 The importance of learning to learn as a student and as a future teacher

All the six interviewees answered that learning to learn was very important both from the point of view of their own learning and from the aspect of their future profession as teachers. First, I will focus on their answers about themselves as learners. The importance of learning to learn becomes clear from the following example.

### **Example 7**

For sure (it is important). If I know how to study and the ways to learn, of course I get more knowledge and expertise.

### **Example 8**

As a learner definitely yes (...) you compare different learning methods. It is very subjective what is good for you - what is good for you is not necessarily good for another.

Learning to learn was found essential and associated with improved learning. In addition, it was important to find the ways that suit the person and get to know oneself. One interviewee also said that “Learning can always be more effective and I should stop more often to think about it”, meaning that one can always develop oneself and never be ready or complete in it. This is in relation to the concept of life-long learning (European Commission 2000: 1,3).

Secondly, I will discuss the importance of learning to learn from the point of view of a future teacher. This quotation sums up well the student’s ideas:

### **Example 9**

For sure. It is the teacher’s job to kind of bring the students opportunities how to learn, to learn to learn. The teacher has to have the required skills to pass on that knowledge. You need to know what learning to learn entails and present the tools, from where the students can pick. It is important that the teacher uses different kind of methods that support different learners: that the students themselves can notice that ‘hey this works for me’. The noticing part I think is very important because no-one else can give you a direct answer that you learn like this and study like this. Learners need to notice themselves that this works and this doesn’t.

For example, giving the students tools and tips about learning had been found important by the respondents. Moreover, passing on the knowledge to the students and guiding them had been mentioned. It had been also indicated that the future students should know themselves as learners and to be able to set goals for learning and reach the goals. Furthermore, it was pointed out that all students are different and their learning should be supported by using variable learning methods. It

can be interpreted that the interviewees had already understood that they have an important role in the students' learning process, as Brandt (1998: 3) and Jaakkola (2000b: 12) highlighted. One of the interviewees also talked about activating the students about learning to learn. This idea was supported by Jaakkola (2000b: 8, 12): the learners must become independent and the student's active role and commitment to learning should be supported. Furthermore, it was commented that the future students should be encouraged to try out new methods and the teacher should ask the students how they learn best. It was also acknowledged that the content does not matter anymore as much, but to give abilities to learn. This is in line with the notion that nowadays, learning is not about possessing information but about processing it (Bransford 2000: 4-5). Overall, the students' perceptions about a teacher's role were similar to the arguments presented in Chapter 2.4. However, as learning to learn is clearly an important matter in teaching, but according to the interviewees' answers not thoroughly covered in the university studies, the matter would require further attention.

The overall attitude towards learning to learn was positive according to the interviewees answers, but attitudes towards a separate course in learning to learn were in contradiction. Perhaps if learning to learn was considered as extra work the respondents would be reluctant to apply it. The solution could be that learning to learn would be implemented in the studies systematically as Jaakkola (2000b: 15-17) suggests.

To summarize the findings, all the students had an idea what learning to learn is but not all of the aspects were mentioned. Moreover, most respondents had an idea of themselves as learners and were able change the learning strategies accordingly. It can be said that learning to learn is present in the university studies indirectly because, for instance, most students set goals for and self-reflect their learning. However, it seemed that learning to learn was not systematically implemented in the studies and was not stated as a clear objective. There was also a contradiction in attitudes: on one hand, attitudes towards a separate course about learning to learn were not all positive but, on the other hand, all students found it important for their learning and future teaching.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the importance of learning to learn in today's world and education based on theories and previous research. In this study, I was able to reveal how learning to learn is currently present in the university studies of English language teacher trainees. Firstly, it turned out that all of the respondents were familiar with the term and it was related to, for example, finding suitable learning strategies. Secondly, some of the interviewees had a clear view of themselves as learners and were able to change the learning strategies to suit the purpose. Thirdly, the concept was rarely discussed directly by the students or their teachers. However, it seemed that learning to learn was present indirectly, as most students planned and reflected on their learning. Overall, learning to learn did not seem to be systematically implemented in the studies and it was not a clear objective. Finally, all of the respondents found learning to learn very important for them as learners and future teachers. The respondents' attitude towards learning to learn was mainly positive, but a separate course did not gain everybody's support.

Overall, it could be suggested that learning to learn should be systematically implemented in the university studies of English language teacher trainees. At least discussion about the subject should be generated, because it is such a fundamental part of learning and, especially, important for future language teachers. Perhaps learning to learn could be included in the English language syllabuses of universities, as Jaakkola (2000b: 15-17) suggests. Consequently, it would probably gain more attention and be implemented thoroughly.

The limitations for my study are discussed next. Firstly, the size of the sample is modest; therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized. In addition, the interviews were conducted in English, which was not the interviewees' mother tongue. Consequently, their expression of thoughts might have been restricted. Thirdly, the concept of learning to learn is complex and only certain aspects of it were included in this study. Learning to learn was explored from a general point of view.

Learning to learn is an important matter and requires further examinations. My suggestion for further research is to focus on how learning to learn could successfully be implemented in the university studies. Another interesting aspect would be to ask the teachers at a university how they understand the concept of learning to learn and if they actively consider it in their teaching.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brandt, R.S. (1998). *Powerful learning*. Alexandria: ASCD.
- Bransford, J. (2000). *How people learn: brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.
- CEFR (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Council of Europe, Language Policy Unit.  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf). (23 October, 2014).
- Dufva, H. (2011). *Ei kysyvä tieltä eksy: kuinka tutkia kielten oppimista ja opettamista haastattelun avulla*. In P. Kalaja, R. Alanen and H. Dufva. (Eds.) *Kieltä tutkimassa – tutkielman laatijan opas*. Helsinki: Finn Lectura. 131-145.
- European Commission. (2007). *The Key Competencies for Life-long Learning – A European Framework*. <http://www.alfa-trall.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/EU2007-keyCompetencesL3-brochure.pdf> (18 November, 2015).
- European Parliament. (2000). *Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000 Presidency Conclusions*. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm) (18 November, 2015).
- Hirsjärvi, S., Remes, P. & Sajavaara, P. (2009). *Tutki ja kirjoita*. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Tammi.
- Hoskins, B. and Fredriksson, U. (2008). *Learning to Learn: What is it and can it be measured?*  
<http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC46532/learning%20to%20learn%20what%20is%20it%20and%20can%20it%20be%20measured%20final.pdf>  
 (16 November, 2015).
- Jaakkola, H. (2000a). *How to Promote Learning to Learn the First Foreign Language. Piloting the Common European Framework of Reference in Finnish Schools*. Helsinki: Hakapaino.
- Jaakkola, H. (2000b). Kielenoppijan opiskelutaitoja kehittämässä. In: Jaakkola, H. (Eds). *Kielenoppijan opiskelutaitoja kehittämässä*. Helsinki: Opetushallitus. 7-18.

- Johnson, K. (2008). *An Introduction to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching. Second edition.* London: Pearson Education Limited.
- Kalaja, P. and Dufva, H. (2005). *Kielten matkassa: opi oppimaan vieraita kieliä.* Helsinki: Oy Finn Lectura Ab.
- Lindberg, J. (1993). *Oppimaan oppiminen – opas oppimistaitojen kehittämiseen.* Turku: Turun yliopiston täydennyskoulutuskeskus.
- Novak, J.D. and Gowin, D.B. (1984). *Learning how to learn.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacKeracher, D. (2004). *Making sense of adult learning. Second edition.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Newcastle University. (2011). *Learning to Learn Research.*  
<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/about/Learningtolearnresearch.htm> (18 November, 2015).
- Opintopolku. (2015). *Englanti (aineenopettaja), humanististen tieteiden kandidaatti ja filosofian maisteri (3v + 2v).*  
<https://opintopolku.fi/app/#!/korkeakoulu/1.2.246.562.17.82071211914> (10 December 2015).
- Pol, B. (2012). *Learning to learn.* In P. Van den Bossche, W.H. Gijsselaers, R. G. Milter. (Eds.) *Learning at the Crossroads of Theory and Practice. Research on Innovative Learning Practices.* Pages: 223-237.
- The Finnish Ministry of Education. (2015). *The principals of the syllabus for comprehensive school 2014.* <http://www.oph.fi/ops2016/perusteet> (19 May, 2015).
- University of Eastern Finland. (2015). *Vieraat kielet ja käänntiede. Opetussuunnitelma 2014-17.*  
[https://www2.uef.fi/documents/11461/2369332/opetussuunnitelma\\_2014-2017\\_vkk.pdf/56f82fc3-a559-4c73-8c29-7004b92498e1](https://www2.uef.fi/documents/11461/2369332/opetussuunnitelma_2014-2017_vkk.pdf/56f82fc3-a559-4c73-8c29-7004b92498e1) (10 December 2015).
- University of Jyväskylä. (2015). *English language syllabus 2015-2017.*  
[https://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/kielit/oppiaineet\\_kls/englanti/studies/englanninkiele\\_nopetussuunnitelma2015-2017](https://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/kielit/oppiaineet_kls/englanti/studies/englanninkiele_nopetussuunnitelma2015-2017) (10 December, 2015).

University of Leicester. (2015). *Honey and Mumford*.

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/teaching/theories/honey-mumford> (14 December, 2015).

Watkins, C., Carnell, E. and Lodge, C. (2007). *Effective learning in classrooms*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.



## **APPENDIX 1: THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

BA thesis

Learning to learn

Miia Niemelä

### **Part 1: The learner**

1. How do you understand the term learning to learn? What does it mean to you? When was the first time you saw or heard of this term?
2. Do you see learning as a process? What kind of stages does it include in your case?
3. Do you know yourself as a learner? Do you know how you learn best? Have you made a learning style test, for instance?
4. What kind of learning strategies you use? Do you change them to suit the purpose?

### **Part 2: The university studies**

5. Do you set goals for your learning? What kind of goals?
6. Do you plan your studies? How?
7. Do you reflect on or self-evaluate your learning? How?
8. Has learning to learn been an objective in some course you have taken in the university?
9. Would you find a course about learning to learn useful in your university studies?
10. Do you find learning to learn important to you as a learner or as a future teacher? Why?