

RELEVANCE OF LEARNING STRATEGIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE (L₂) TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

The paper aims at investigating the relevance of learning strategies in second language (L₂) teaching and learning. Over the years significant shift has taken place in language learning leading to a greater emphasis on teaching and learning languages. The paper therefore provides an overview of issues concerning second language learning strategies (meta-cognitive, cognitive knowledge, social learning and cooperative learning) and highlight their importance in L₂ teaching and learning. It explores the pedagogical implications of learner training to learn and then analyses the issues concerning the choice of effective strategies in language learning, choice of language learning and learner training for teachers and course designers. The result findings show that strategies in the teaching of L₂ are to encourage the students to establish communication with people who speak the target languages. It further recommends that in teaching L₂, the effective methods should be those which are arranged according to principles of cooperation learning and social strategies and concludes that language learning strategies should involve individual's unique cognitive, social, effective learning styles and strategies.

Keywords: Learning strategies, second language (L₂) learners' autonomy, strategy training.

Introduction

L₁ refers to the language you learn since you were born. It is commonly known as the language of your parents or care givers while the L₂ refers to as the language learned after L₁ has been acquired. Over the years, research in L₂ teaching and learning did ignore the contributions of learning theories. The oversight showed that language learning is quite different from other disciplines and independent of other fields of knowledge. This argument was why psychology justified the fact that L₂ learning should be considered in isolation (Ignacio, 1996).

However, scholars had since two decades detected the opposite trend on second language learning. Such researchers are Fillimore (1979), Ellis (1985), Willing (1988), Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Oxford (1989), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and a host of them too numerous to mention. These scholars have done research on specific factors of L₂ learning, such as learning strategies in the light of general theories of learning. The main thrust of the paper and what permits it is to showcase the importance of the learning strategies in order that L₂ learners will become aware of, and identify the strategies that they could potentially use in training. L₁ refers to the language you learn since you were born. It is commonly known as the language of your parents or care givers while the L₂ refers to as the language learned after L₁ has been acquired.

Training in, and awareness of learning strategies by second language learners will help to alter the learners current attitudes towards language learning. According to Oxford cited in (Ogenyi, 2014:10) many language students (even adults) like to be told what to do, and they only do what is

clearly essential to get a good grade even if they fail to develop useful skills in the process. Such attitudes and behaviours that make learning difficult must be changed else any effort to train learners to rely more on themselves and use better strategies is bound to fail. It is hoped that both L₂ learners and their teachers will not only draw insights from, but be inspired by the knowledge that this study provides.

The Concept of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Within L₂ education, a number of definitions of LLS have been used by key persons in the field. In their study, O'Malley and Chamot (1990:1) define LS as "the special thoughts of behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information". Oxford (1992/1993:18) provides the following comprehensive definition:

Language strategies (are) specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L₂ skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalisation, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language strategies as tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability. In a survey article, Weinstein and Mayer (1986:315) define learning strategy broadly as "behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning" (which are) intended to influence the learner's encoding process. Willing (1988) points out that learning entails assimilation and that language strategies are characterized as any means learners use to transform the external input into internal and personal resources and skills.

In the literature, different scholars use various terms to refer to the concept such as learner strategy, learning strategies, and language learning strategies. In the study, these terms are used interchangeably. Generally speaking, five main features can be inferred from the literature reviewed to include:

- a. Strategies play an important role in second language (L₂) learning as they promote and facilitate language learning.
- b. Learners themselves are the actual agents in their use and choice of strategies as they are directly affected by them.
- c. Language learning, as learning in general has to be internalized and strategies are in fact problem-solving mechanisms or techniques used by learners to cope with the complex process of learning.
- d. Learning strategies are not always observable to the human eye. This explains why second language teachers, in general, are not conscious of them, and
- e. Strategies are flexible and it is logical to think that they can be taught and learners can be trained in their management, though it is possible to speak of "strategy training" or "learner training" as the techniques used by teachers to make learners aware of the existence of their own strategies and train them in their practice.

Lessard-Clouston (1999) claims that different scholars in the field of LLS, have divergent views on what constitute the features of LLS. He cites Oxford (1990a) and Wenden and Rubin (1987) who postulate that, when discussing LLS, consideration of a desire for control and autonomy of learning on the part of the learner must be included. He further explains that Cohen (1990) insists that only conscious strategies are LLS, and that there must be a choice involved on the part of the learner. He concludes quoting Oxford, in her teacher oriented text by summarising that LLS:

- a. Allow learners to become more self-directed
- b. Expand the role of language teachers
- c. Problem-oriented
- d. Involves many aspects, not just the cognitive
- e. Can be taught
- f. Are flexible, and
- g. Are influenced by a variety of factors.

Strategies in language learning is very important in ultimate language performance, it is defined as “specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques such as seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task-used by students to enhance their own learning” (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992.3). The authors further suggest six strategies that learners will use when learning a language. These are: Memory, Cognitive, Comprehension, Meta-cognitive, Affective and Social learning.

Language Learning Strategies Classified

There are different typologies established in the definition of strategies and these include sets of strategies such as direct, indirect, cognitive, meta-cognitive, social, communicative, linguistic, non-linguistic, analytic, gestalt, compensation and retrieval. For the purposes of our discussion, we are going to refer to cognitive, meta-cognitive, social and communicative strategies, as these are four groups of strategies included in most classifications. Cognitive strategies are fundamentally operations used by the learner to obtain knowledge and understanding of the linguistic system. A learner who finds a difficult word in a text and succeeds at inferring its meaning from the context would be putting a cognitive strategy in operation. Other cognitive strategies are generalized, making comparisons between words, practising as well as analysing and reasoning (Oxford, 1989). Meta-cognitive strategies are concerned with how to learn or with learning to learn. These language learning strategies involve being aware of and thinking on the learning process together with planning, monitoring and self-evaluating, setting goals, objectives planning and organizing language tasks.

Directed attention and self-management are generally considered as strategies belonging to this group (Oxford, 1989). So the students who keeps a record of the material covered in each of the language lessons is for example, making use, consciously or unconsciously of a meta-cognitive strategy. Fillmore (1979) explores the scope of social strategies and associates them with the social behaviours learners adopt in language learning. Counting on friends for help, participating in group conversations while not understanding fully what is being discussed, and cooperating with others, are examples of social strategies. Communication strategies have been almost exclusively studied in relation to oral production (Ignacho,1996). The second language learner taking part in a conversation is obliged to make series of decision on how to comprehend and convey the message effectively and this process will bring a series of adjustments. Ellis (1985) defines them as follows: communication strategies are psycholinguistic plans which exist as part of the language user’s communicative competence. They are potentially conscious and serve as substitutes for production plans which the learner is unable to implement.

Grouped under this label are: paraphrase, avoidance, restructuring, code-switching, foreignizing, literal translation and repetition (Abbs and Freebaim,1989). The learner who mentally plans in advance the message to be communicated is using a communication strategy. The same is true when learners repeat the same words several times before speaking or avoid specific expressions which are unknown to them and finally decide to paraphrase them.

Relevance of LLS to Second Language (L₂) Teaching and Learning.

Within the current communicative approaches to language teaching, the principal objective is for the learner to develop communicative competence in the target language. LLS help students in doing so. However, there are important distinction between communication strategies and language learning strategies. While the former are used by speakers intentionally and consciously in order to cope with difficulties in communication in an L₂, the later is used more generally for all strategies that second language learners use in learning the target language. Communication strategies are thus just one of the language learning strategies (Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

For all L₂ teachers who aim at helping develop their students communicative competence and language learning, an understanding of LLS are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement which is essential for developing communicative competence (Lessard-Clouston:1). Teachers can help students understand good LLS and also train them to develop and use them. In addition to developing students' communicative competence, LLS are important because research suggests that training students to use LLS can help them become better language learners.

Language learning strategies are also important because second language learners on their part, can employ a number of positive strategies in their learning efforts. Such strategies include:

- Using an active task approach in and monitoring one's L₂ performance.
- Listening to programmes conducted in the foreign language (English) on the radio in the L₂ environment and;
- Speaking with native speakers when the opportunity comes (is available) (Ogenyi, 2014).

To determine the relevance of the learning strategies, Kung (2017) in the study of teaching L₂ reaching comprehension, investigated using reading strategy instruction (meta-cognition and cognitive knowledge). Results suggest that learners generally prefer meta-cognitive to cognitive knowledge when it comes to reading English texts, and authentic reading materials also are found to heighten their learning motivation as well as attitude positively due to several salient factors. The study revealed that there is a positive correlation between students' learning motivation and learning outcome for effective reading comprehension in the teaching and learning in Taiwan schools.

In another study, Mehmet (2016) used qualitative research method in the study of the importance of strategies of social language learning and cooperative learning in the process of teaching Turkish as a foreign language. Findings show out that the strategies in the teaching of L₂ is to encourage the students to establish communication with people who speak the target language. Among the functions of the social strategies according to the study, are asking questions in L₂ language, receiving answers, correcting mistakes, establishing cooperation, trying to study feelings and thoughts of people of the targeted culture. The researcher further revealed that L₂ learning develops

social connections and increases motivation among the students. Social connections belong to a process of establishing positive bonds between the members of the group. The bond according to him brings increase in conformity within the class and encourages the students for participation. According to Saban (2004:20), the lack of social connections among members of the group lays the grounds for the students' independent work and the lack of any interaction among them. Cooperation plays an important role in the development of communication in L₂ learning as well as increase richness in meanings. Language learning activities is based on cooperation and social learning theories guarantee that a contribution is made in the development of the students' language vocabulary. Activities of cooperative learning reflect richness of the language used by both the teachers and the students. Such activities increase the variety of words used while speaking L₂, making uses, the study of the relevance of the language more efficient. However, cooperation is the principle of learning activities in the classroom.

Choice of Effective Strategies as a Determinant Factor in Language Learning

If we agree that learning strategies promote learning and also acknowledge the existence of a wide number of strategies, it can be concluded that LLS constitute an important factor to be considered in second language learning and teaching. Earlier research on strategies (Naiman cited in Ignacio, 1996; Stein 1975 and Rubin 1981) was mainly restricted to the study of good language learners (GLLs). GLLs are then described as self-awareness, inquisitive, tolerant to ambiguity, self critical, realistic, willing to experiment, actively involved and organized.

Years later, Rubin and Wenden (1987), Oxford (1989), Ellis and Sinclair (1989) maintain that once strategies which promote and facilitate learning have been identified, learners should be trained and taught in the use of those good strategies. The general principle should be handled with care. We believe that strategies can and should be taught, but learners possess their own set of strategies (Ignacio, 1986). We also do not feel the need for imposing on them a particular strategic system which may not be in keeping with their personality, cultural background, cognitive style, age, and so on. Therefore, students should be made aware of the existence of language learning strategies and they should be encouraged in their use by offering them a series of possibilities or alternatives and allowing them to choose and experiment with those sets of strategies which suit them best.

Factors that Influence Strategy Choice in Language Learning

At the level of language teaching, the main problem found with most of the studies on language learning strategies lies in the notion of the Good Language Learning (GLL). Universally, sharing a series of good language strategies has been taken on board too rapidly. However, the existence of a number of factors directly affecting the strategy choice made by learners has been generally ignored. As willing (1987:289) suggests any training process to develop learning strategies has to take all such factors into consideration. They can be described as follows:

- Personality traits-exerts a direct influence on the learners selection of strategies (extroversion versus introversion, active versus passive)
- Motivation level-highly motivated students adopt a positive attitude towards teaching and learning, and this brings with it the practice of a series of particular strategies different from those of low motivated learners.
- Learners' expectations and learners' purpose for learning the language-learners will adapt their strategy according to their objective and subjective needs.

- Sex - O'Malley (1985a) shows that secondary school girls resort to a different use of strategies from that of their male peers.
- Tasks requirements-some activities demand from learners a high number of mental operations for their solution. According to O'Malley (1985b) students are prone to use a larger number of strategies with complex language tasks and vice versa.
- Ethno-cultural background-strategies seem to be culturally bound although this has not been proved by research with hard data. Ethnographic studies of Riley's kind (1981) follow this direction.
- Age-O'Malley (1985) showed that adults do not use the same sort of strategies as secondary school students.
- Teachers' expectations and instruction-teachers may constrain the learners' framework and use of strategies if they show a prescriptive attitude in their approach to teaching.
- Stage of learning-O'Malley (1985a) and Palacio (1994a,b) prove that advanced learners tend to use different types of strategies from more elementary ones. There is a general trend towards a higher number of meta-cognitive strategies as the student progresses in his/her learning.
- Cognitive style-it is quite to think that the manner in which the learner perceives, monitors conceptualizes and recalls linguistic information affects the learner's strategy choice. So second language teachers should offer and promote a wide variety of strategies from which students can choose according to their own learning style.

Implications of Learner Training for Teachers and for Course Designers

If we intend to consider the implications of "learner training" for teachers, we need to revise first what is meant by the roles of both teachers and learners together with factors affecting those roles. It is generally assumed that teachers' and student's roles may be different. There exists a correlation between them, that is one role is affected by the other (Ignacio, 1996). Traditionally, teachers play two primary functions: instructional and managerial. On the other hand, teachers communicate, provide, supply and transmit knowledge to learners. Indeed, teachers are instructors. Also, they are in charge of the organization of the class, make important decisions, devise activities, produce materials, plan and assess students' work. They perform the role of managers as well. These functions complement each other and in practice it is difficult to separate one from the other.

In a more humanistic perspective (Moskowitz 1973, Rogers 1983 and Nunan 1988) teaching and learning processes are the result of a mutual cooperation and interaction between teachers and learners. Learners have become the real manager of learning and as a consequence, a change in focus from the teachers to the learners seems to be necessary. Nunan (1998) refers to this as the learner-centered curriculum. The teacher is now a facilitator of learning and equally deal with the strengths and willingness of the learners. As Allwright (1981) claims, we should not expect learners to be specially gifted and show particular skills at the types of the decision-making involved in the management of language learning. This therefore lies the justification of "learner training" as a means to involve learners in deciding on their own learning.

Research by renowned figures like O'Malley; (1985a) Oxford (1989), Ellis and Sinclair (1989) supports the belief that learners who receive learner training generally learn better than those who do not. So, Horwitz (1988) and Wenden (1991) encourage teachers to discover the prescriptive

beliefs of their own students and then, translate the knowledge into teaching strategies with the aim of enabling learners to approach second language learning autonomously and successfully. It is also important that students themselves be given opportunities to reflect on their own learning process so that they may become aware of their own criteria and of how those ideas influence their learning.

According to Ignacio (1996) the new role of the teacher emerging from these principles will aim at:

- a. Giving advice that is, counseling learners on the development of learning objectives and learning strategies.
- b. Developing in students a series of strategies independent of the teachers' support and leading to individualization, self-directed and autonomous learning, both inside and outside the classroom.
- c. Involving students as much as possible in the whole teaching and learning processes
- d. Making students responsible for their decisions and encouraging student self-assessment and evaluation by stimulating the production of a series of agreed criteria.
- e. Raising awareness with respect to their use of strategies and on their views of language, language learning and language teaching.
- f. Respecting learners' cognitive style and attempting to match as closely as possible the teaching style with learners' cognitive style and,
- g. Creating the circumstances in which students become familiar and apply strategies appropriate for the type of activities being used.

Learner Training for Course Design

Most of the existing language courses are designed to improve the learners' communicative competence. It is generally admitted that by the end of the course, if this has at least been successful enough, students would have reached some linguistic objectives. Accepting that learners training may play an important role in second language learning, a certain number of learner training tasks should be included in the general structure. This means that two main areas should be covered:- linguistic/communicative development and learner training. A suitable integration of these two features should be fully developed as learners may react against learner training that is not sufficiently linked with their own language learning.

The following factors according to Wenden (1987) should be taken into account when deciding how to integrate learner training with language training:

- a. Range and specificity of the learner training component of the course;
- b. When and how it is going to be applied; and
- c. Learners' needs.

In other words, we have to know whether or one particular ones; inside or outside the classroom and compatible with learners' subjective and objective needs. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) suggest that for a perfect integration of the levels previously mentioned, a framework with two stages could be followed:

- a. Would consist of a preparation for language learning and would be concerned with the development of meta-cognitive strategies.

- b. Would be centered on both cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies connected with specific linguistic tasks.
 - c.
- Oxford (1989) offers a model similar to the previous one with three different phases:
- a. Awareness training, that is, consciousness-raising or familiarization training.
 - b. One-time strategy training or practising one or more strategies with specific tasks and,
 - c. Long-term strategy training that is, students learn the importance of strategies and evaluate their own performance.

However, learning factors such as age and students language levels resources, motivational and effective issues, learners background and context should also be borne in mind by the course designer. Learner training in the target language is only suitable for intermediate and advanced second language students, but such training for elementary language students should be carried out in the mother tongue. Children will probably not be very receptive to learner activities as most of them may involve a high degree of abstraction. Also learners from different cultural background will respond according to their general beliefs on language learning and language teaching. The time variable and the context are also important factors to keep in mind. In a state or public schools, for example, teachers are bound to follow a general syllabus and important adjustments will have to be made if the component of learner training is intended to be introduced. The structure of a course be open enough to allow for possible changes according to the learners' ongoing needs, interests, promote opportunities for self-directed learning and autonomy.

The following learner training implications can be summarized as follows:

- a. Teachers should keep learning factors (age, language level, ethno-cultural background and so on) in mind when designing the second language (L₂) course. It is advisable that a needs analysis should be conducted before the beginning of the course to identify learners' objective needs. A needs analysis for this kind may give an indication of the strategies (cognitive, meta-cognitive, social and communication) teachers should select and develop;
- b. Learners should be informed from the very beginning about the general aims of the course and should even be involved in the course design;
- c. The course structure should not be prescriptive. On the contrary, it should be flexible, evolving and developing according to the learners' needs. There should be time for individual consultation and self-access.
- d. Both the linguistic development and the learner should be left free to use a unit integrated so that students may consider the whole structure of the course as a unit rather than as a combination of bits and pieces;
- e. Learners' strategies should be developed and learners should be left free to use their preferred training strategies not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom. All these should lead ultimately to self-directed and autonomous learning;
- f. Teachers should consider resources available in terms of the possibilities for setting up a classroom library, a writing/reading room, language laboratory, video room, a self-access centre and so on; and
- g. Teachers should plan and design tasks that may stimulate the learner's use of strategies;
- h. Students should be capable of extra plating their language learning strategies and their language experience to other areas of the curriculum.

Designing and running a course with these characteristics is not an easy job because it involves a high degree of flexibility working with quite a high number of variables in terms of the pedagogical objectives accomplished (Ignacio, 1996).

Implications of Learner Training for Materials Production (Instructional Materials)

According to Alwright (1981), we need teaching materials to save learners from teachers' deficiencies, in spite of the fact that these materials may be limited in their scope because they do not always account for many of the aspects involved in the complex management of learning. Alwright (1981) advocates the need for learning materials rather than teaching materials and he introduces the notions of learning guides to language learning and ideas and rationale books for teachers. This shift in focus from teaching to learning materials is highly relevant and fits perfectly well in our discourse of learner training. If we look at general English learning text books, it can easily be perceived that they are basically thought out for four main purposes;

1. Presenting and systematizing language,
2. Offering activities, tasks and exercises for the practice of the four language skills,
3. Introducing some aspects of the British and or American cultural life and,
4. In some cases, not many developing students' imagination.

In these teaching materials, there is no mention of learner strategy development and learning process reflection. It is true that in the past several attempts to fill this gap have been made by some text books writers such as Whitney (1985), Abbs and Freebairn (1989), Hutchinson 1993 and Greenall and Corton-sprenger 1992). However, they have not been completely successful because learner training is not systematic and it simply consists of a series of sporadic tasks without a consistent rationale underlying them. Furthermore, Ellis and Sinclair (1989) show serious weaknesses such as the imposition of a particular model of supposedly good strategies and the failure to integrate learner training with the students' linguistic development.

Apart from this, these materials are not geared with different levels of learners and they presuppose both small groups and bilingual classes. However, the materials needed to be really effective for learner training should offer a wide range of possibilities rather than imposing one and only one style of learning. Learner training tasks then should be devised according to the following criteria:

- a. To build up confidence for experimenting with language
- b. To provide learners with opportunities to make choices about their learning
- c. To have a clear outcome (reflection and experimentation)
- d. To show "face validity" as language learning activities and the possibility of being "honest".
- e. To be susceptible to being used with large groups in both bilingual and multilingual classes
- f. To promote a balance between learning processes and what is actually learnt
- g. To be fully integrated with the other language development exercises
- h. To help learners perform other exercises
- i. To raise students' awareness of the rationale behind classroom activities
- j. To be personal but at the same time having a reference point.

Language to learn should be essential part of language teaching materials. Textbooks authors and material designers should provide practical and feasible ideas about language learning and learner

training without imposing them on both teachers and learners. Therefore, a more open, flexible and systematic approach to materials production in the area of learner training is necessary.

Recommendation

The study recommends that in teaching of L₂, the effective methods should be those which are arranged according to:

1. Social learning strategies; and,
2. Principles of cooperation learning. These strategies will enhance high efficiency in the teaching of L₂ in Nigeria.
3. Teaching activities of language learning should be prepared in accordance with the social strategies and principles of cooperative learning. This, will offer a contribution to answer the student-centred problems which they may be facing during L₂ teaching and learning.
4. Socialization attempts of every student especially during acculturation exercises/training among the foreign language students should be highly encouraged.

Conclusion

In this study, the features of learner strategy training and language learning strategies expose active rather than passive learning. Language learning strategies involves individual's unique cognitive, social and affective learning styles and strategies. However, this paper provided a brief overview of language learning strategies by examining the different meanings ascribed to the concept by some scholars in the field. It also offered some approaches teachers could use in implementing language learning training within their own second language classes and notes that using language learning strategies and training in second language class is not only relevant to the learners in their language learning, but also helps to encourage both the teachers and the learners to reflect on and improve upon their teaching and learning respectively. It recommends the use of social and cooperative learning and also contends that if learners must be autonomous in their learning, encouraging and promoting learner motivation should be a key concern for the teachers.

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