

Cognitive Strategies used by advanced learners

COGNITIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY ADVANCED LEARNERS OF
THE ENGLISH ESPANISH PROGRAM
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NARIÑO

By:

Andres Alexander Melo Rodriguez.

And

John Narvaez Ruano

SCHOOL OF HUMAN SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES

UNIVERSITY OF NARIÑO

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ABSTRACT

This research project was directed to get information by using questionnaires and personal interviews to the advanced learners of English at the University of Nariño. It helped to identify which were the cognitive learning strategies of English used by the advanced students and in this way to take some conclusions and give some recommendations.

Besides, these cognitive English learning strategies were used by all the students of the University of Nariño at least in some way, specially the ones with communicative purposes.

This investigation contains quantitative and qualitative aspects because it could be analyzed which were the most effective cognitive strategies and the least useful ones in the English learning process by using statistic graphics and qualitative analysis.

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RESUMEN

Esta investigación se encamino a conseguir información por medio de cuestionarios y entrevistas personales realizadas a los estudiantes avanzados de Ingles de la Universidad de Nariño.

Esta investigación ayudo a identificar cuales fueron las estrategias cognitivas de aprendizaje de Ingles usadas por los estudiantes avanzados para de esta manera sacar algunas conclusiones y dar algunas recomendaciones.

Además, estas estrategias cognitivas de Ingles fueron usadas por todos los estudiantes de Ingles de la Universidad de Nariño al menos de alguna forma, especialmente las que cuentan con propósitos comunicativos.

Esta investigación contiene aspectos cuantitativos y cualitativos ya que se pudo analizar cuales fueron las estrategias cognitivas mas y las menos efectivas en el aprendizaje del Ingles por medio de gráficos estadísticos y análisis cualitativos.

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Introduction

Nowadays, the learning of English has become a need to communicate with different people around the world with different purposes, for obtaining several professional opportunities or for general learning purposes. Learners try to make improve their learning process to make it faster, more effective and more successful by using several techniques or strategies as will be seen later. However, it is not clear if learners use strategies consciously or if they use them at all. Knowing more about the strategies used by foreign language learners might help teachers and learners themselves to make better decisions in the teaching-learning process. Specifically, this paper aims to identifying the strategies that the advanced learners of the University of Nariño use. In this case, a comprehensible literature review will be the base for this study.

Since language learning strategies is a topic widely studied and authors like Oxford (1990) have carried out extensive research, it is necessary to narrow the scope of this research. Thus, the main objective of this monograph is to identify the cognitive strategies used by the advanced learners a t the University of Nariño. For reaching that goal, information will be collected by using

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a survey and interviews which will be analysed in order to possibly recommend to other teachers and learners the strategies that can enhance the learning process for less advanced students.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Subject

Foreign Language Learning

Title

Cognitive Strategies Used by Advanced learners of English of the English and Spanish program at the University of Nariño.

The Problem Description

Students may face different problems in the learning of a language because it is a long process and teachers can observe that in foreign language learning some students progress rapidly through the initial stages of a new language, while others struggle along making very slow progress. People learn in an individual and different way and nowadays teachers should not intend to get the same response from all learners to the instruction given. According to Lightbown and Spada (1993) there are learners' differences that influence the way in which a person takes on the task of learning another language.

Learners have certain characteristics which combined with each other or alone lead learners to successful or not so successful language learning. The authors discuss differences in the categories of intelligence, aptitude,

personality, motivation and learning styles. The topic of language learning strategies is included in this last category. It may be that teachers do not pay attention to the learning styles preferred by their students and this lack of information can affect the way they plan their teaching. If we as teachers know how our students learn or what strategies they use to learn more effectively we might improve the way English or any other foreign language is taught. This is why this topic has been chosen for this research. It is necessary that teachers and students become aware that the learning process can be improved if they apply or at least know about language learning strategies. If teachers knew more about this concept then a variety of materials and activities could be used to appeal to the different styles of students.

Research Question

What are the cognitive strategies most commonly used by advanced foreign language learners at the university of Nariño?

Justification

Currently, the knowledge and use of an international language for communicating is the main concern around the world and that widely used language is the English. For this reason many people of several ages are in

institutions, schools and universities among others with the main goal of learning this language.

Trends in teaching right now see that the instruction is centred on the learner and not on the teacher as it used to be. Learner strategies have a lot to do with the movement from teacher centeredness to learner centeredness. In this case, teachers and learners may find it very valuable to understand more about cognitive strategies because teachers could provide their learners with training in strategies so that students become more autonomous learners and teachers can use the same information to plan, implement and assess learning. Knowing what students do to carry out the learning process can help us know what to do and what should be avoided in the teaching and learning process.

Besides being a topic connected to recent trends in methodology, language learning strategies also offers a wide review of literature and the specialized authors and researchers that will be cited all through the paper offer a highly readable account of the nature and significance of learning strategies that can be of interest for teachers and researchers.

This project is important for students because in the classroom it adds more sources for learning and for

enhancing the learning process, it could also help them develop new tools through the use of cognitive language strategies in order to enhance their language learning and, as explained by Canale and Swain (1984) the knowledge of how to use those strategies can be useful from the early to the advanced stages of the language learning process. Besides, teachers can choose this project for getting informed about other types of resources such as the cognitive language strategies that can help students in the language acquisition process. Moreover, knowing about the students learning preferences can contribute to improve the way teachers choose tasks, techniques and materials.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) Teachers may also find it useful because the learning strategies can be used as a basis for planning more effectively the instructional practice.

And finally, according to the results, these cognitive language learning strategies can be implemented in the schools and institutions where English is taught as part of the teaching and learning process.

Objectives

General Objective

To identify which are the cognitive strategies used by advanced learners of the English and Spanish program, in the foreign language learning process.

Specific Objectives

To contribute with a comprehensive review of literature about language learning strategies that can be useful for teachers and students interested in this topic.

To identify which of the strategies used by students can be recommended to enhance FLL (foreign language learning).

To apply instruments related to language learning strategies in order to obtain data that can be analysed thoroughly.

Variables

Independent Variable

Cognitive learning strategies.

Dependent Variable

Academic performance.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner Differences

Learning a language is not an activity that can be separated from what a person feels and does. It has been suggested that learner differences can affect negatively or positively the way a person learns a second or foreign language. Authors such as Lightbown and Spada (1993) have identified some categories regarding these differences. The most relevant ones are: intelligence, aptitude, personality, age, and motivation and learning styles. Some of them can be influenced by the teacher. Other differences such as age cannot be changed. A brief description of these differences is next:

Several researchers have shown that there is a link between intelligence and foreign language learning but according to Geneese (1976), cited by Lightbown and Spada (1993) intelligence is more strongly related to certain kinds of second language abilities than others, they are related to more formal studies such as grammar, reading, writing, and vocabulary study. But on the other hand, they are unrelated to the oral skills. Therefore, intelligence is an important factor if the instruction is formal but when the classroom instruction is less formal (more

communicative), intelligence may play a less important role.

Another important factor is the aptitude that some individuals have which is rather an exceptional or specialized ability even though such factor is associated with another characteristic such as general intelligence or personality.

One important aspect of personality necessary for progress in language learning is Risk-taking. Therefore, inhibition is a negative factor in language learning.

There are other several personality characteristics such as self esteem, empathy, dominance, talkativeness and responsiveness and all those factors have an influence on how successful a person is in the development of communicative competence.

Motivation is next, and it is defined by Lightbown and Spada in terms of two factors: learner's communicative needs and their attitudes towards the second language community. If learners need to speak the second language in a wide range of social situations or to fulfil professional ambitions, they will find the value of the foreign language and will therefore be motivated to acquire proficiency in it. But on the other hand, if the learner is pressured

externally, the internal motivation may be minimal and the attitudes towards learning may be negative.

Finally, taking into account learning styles, Lightbown and Spada (1993) also suggest that different learners approach a task with a different set of abilities and preferred strategies and those ways of approaching a task are more successful for one person than for another. Oxford (1990), cited by Lightbown and Spada (1993) suggests that the learners should be encouraged to use all means available as they work to learn another language.

Learning Strategies

"The learning strategies are specific procedures that the students use to develop certain processes of learning Richards and Locken (1994).

Oxford (1990); defines "*strategies of learning as the specific actions undertaken by the students to make the learning more pleasant, faster, more homing, more feasible and easier to be transferred more to new situations of learning*". The learning strategies are aids that are used for "learning" a language since they are instruments that promote the homing participation and activation.

Learning strategies are alternatives that the students use to increase their own learning. "*These are tools for active and self-directed involvement, which is essential for*

developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence.” (Oxford, 1990, p1).

Suitable learning strategies help the students to increase their communicative competence and to give more self confidence.

They are characterized by contributing to the development of communicative competence, helping to solve problems and supporting the learning directly and indirectly.

Also, it can be said that they are not always observable but they are often conscious, they can be learned, they are flexible and they are subjected to factors such as the personality, nature of the learning tasks, among others. (Lineamientos curriculares. Page 26-27. MEN)

Types of Strategies

According to Oxford (1990), there are two general types of strategies: the direct and indirect ones. In the indirect strategies we find three categories: memory, cognitive and compensation strategies and in the indirect ones, we have the metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Memory Strategies

They are those that help the students to keep and to recover information. They create new mental nexuses (Example: The location of new words in a context); the application of images and sounds (Like the representation of sounds in the memory; the correct revision (structured Revision) and the use of actions (use of physical answer or sensations).

Cognitive Strategies

These strategies are essential in learning a new language. Oxford (1990) states that these ones make emphasis on the practice, repetition and analysis of expressions to add them to our vocabulary. -The strategies have a common function: manipulate and transform to the target language by the learner. Oxford (1990) also mentions that these strategies are very popular between language learners. The learners are often in contact with words from radio, TV programs, movies, articles, etc. But so that this contact will be useful, they have strategies like taking notes to add these words to their vocabulary practice them and use them for speaking and writing according to the grammatical structures of the language. The cognitive strategies are divided into four sets:

1. Practising

According to Oxford (1990), these are the most important cognitive strategies:

- Repeating
- Formally practising with sounds and writing systems.
- Recognizing and using formulas and patterns.
- recombining.
- Practising naturalistically.

2. Receiving and sending messages.

These are necessary tools, according to Oxford (1990), one such strategy, known as getting the idea quickly, helps learners locate the main idea by means of analogy, this strategy involves that it is not necessary for learners to centre them in every single word:

-Getting the idea quickly: by means of preview questions without translating text or conversations.

-Using resources for receiving and sending messages: Use any kind of resources to send messages and understand income ones.

3. Analysing and reasoning

These strategies are commonly used by language learners. Oxford (1990) mentions that the students construct a model in their minds based on analysis and

comparison create general rules and revise these ones when new information is presented.

Learners can often use these strategies to understand the meaning of a new expression or to create a new expression:

- Reasoning deductively: using general rules and applying them to new target language situations.

- Analysing expressions: analyse the meaning by sections.

- Analysing contrastively: compare elements to determinate similarities and differences between languages.

- Translating.

- Transferring: apply directly knowledge of words, concepts or structures from one language to another.

4. Creating structure for input and output

These strategies are ways to create structures; this is an essential part for comprehension and production in the new language :

- Taking notes: writing down the main idea or specific points.

- Summarizing: make a resume of a longer passage.

- Highlighting: employ a variety of techniques to underline the important information of a passage.

They let us communicate in spite of the limitations in the knowledge of the language. In this group we have the practice of patterns, the reception and sending of messages (for example the concentration in the main idea of a message and the analysis of expressions)

Compensation Strategies

They are those that make the communication in spite of the limitations or deficiencies in the knowledge possible of the language. These contain the intelligent approach (the use of non-linguistic keys to guess the meaning) and the overcoming of limitations in the speech and the writing (As the use of synonymous circumlocutions).

Metacognitive Strategies

They are the most extensive abilities in the executive order that can imply planning to monitor or to evaluate and success of a learning activity, in addition they make the control possible of the own learning by means of the organization, the planning and the evaluation. There are three types of metacognitive strategies: The concentration and the attention (Connection of new information with material already known), the planning of the learning (Determination of objectives) (and the evaluation of the own self monitoring learning).

Affective Strategies

These help the students to take control on their emotions, attitudes, motivations and values. In this group of strategies they are the diminution of anxiety (By means of the use of music or the laughter for example), and the auto stimulation (To award itself to one same one), and the measurement of our emotions (Discussion of the feelings with other people), the strategies that can be classified in this group are: Cooperation or work with pairs to solve a problem, to join information, to join notes, to obtain the feedback on the activities of the learning. To ask the teacher as it is possible to be developed the problems to clarify paraphrases doubts to request explanation or examples. To also be convinced using the power of the mind to also make sure that the activity of the learning will be successful with the purpose of clearing the fear of that activity.

Social Strategies

They help the students in the interaction with other people and in the understanding the formulation of questions. For example, to clarify, verify or to correct. They also help to the cooperation with the others (the cooperation with effective users of the language and the empathy with other people.

The development of the understanding is a cultural aspect and the ideas and feelings of other people.

According to (O'Malley et al 1985 a).The learning strategies have been differentiated into three categories depending on the level or type of processing involved, those strategies are the cognitive, metacognitive and the social affective ones.

Cognitive Strategies

These operate directly on incoming information manipulating it in ways that enhance learning. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) cited by (O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggest that these strategies can be subsumed under three broad groupings which may include other strategies that rely at least in part upon knowledge in long term memory such as inferencing summarizing, deduction imagery and transfer:

Typical cognitive strategies for listening and reading comprehension are:

1. Rehearsal or repeating the names of items or objects that have been heard ;
2. Organization or grouping and classifying words, terminology, or concepts according to their semantic or syntactic attributes.

3. Inferencing or using information in oral text to guess meanings of new linguistic items predict outcomes or complete missing parts.

4. Summarizing or intermittently synthesizing what one has heard to ensure the information has been retained.

5. Deduction or applying rules to understand language.

6. Imagery or using visual images (either generated or actual) to understand and remember new verbal information.

7. Transfer or using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task and;

8. elaboration-linking ideas contained in new information or integrating new ideas with known information (elaboration may be a general category for other strategies, such as imagery, summarizing transfer and deduction).

Metacognitive Strategies

They are skills that may entail planning for, monitoring or evaluating the success of a learning activity. The metacognitive strategies for receptive or productive language tasks are:

Selective attention for special aspects of a learning task, as in planning to listen for key words or phrases planning the organization of either written or spoken discourse. Monitoring or reviewing attention to a task, monitoring

comprehension for information that should be remembered or monitoring production.

Evaluating or checking comprehension after completion of a receptive language activity or evaluating language production after it has accured.

Social Affective Strategies

They are a broad grouping that involves either interaction with another person or in directional control over affect.

The strategies that would be useful are:

-cooperation or working with peers to solve a problems, full information check notes or set feedback on a learning activity;

-Questioning for clarification or eliciting from a teacher or peer additional explanation, rephrasing or examples; and

-Self- talk, or using mental control to accure oneself that a learning activity will be successful or to reduce anxiety in a completion of a task.

Definition of Terms

Cognitive Strategy

One that involves mental manipulation or transformation of materials or tasks and is intended to enhance comprehension, acquisition, or retention.

Metacognitive Strategy

A learning strategy that involves thinking about or knowledge of the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring learning while it is taking place, or self - evaluation of learning after the task has been completed.

Primary Strategies

Term used to describe strategies that operate directly on the material to be learned, such as comprehension and memory strategies. See also support strategies.

Selective Attention

Deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of input, often by scanning for key words, concepts, and/or linguistic markers.

Social / Affective Strategy

One of three general types of learning strategy. It may consist of using social interactions to assist in the comprehension, learning, or retention of information. It may also consist of using mental control over personal affect that interferes with learning. See also cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy.

Support Strategies

Term used to describe strategies that help maintain attention to materials and an appropriate attitude for learning. See also primary strategies.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Design of the study

For this monograph it has been decided that the most suitable design is the non experimental and descriptive design, which has the intention of describing and presenting different strategies of learning used by advanced students. In addition and if possible, a proposal regarding the most effective cognitive strategies is going to be suggested at the end of the research.

Population and Sample

For this monograph, the sample will be constituted by 20 advanced students of the Linguistics and Languages Department at the University of Nariño. The students are both men and women and are studying to become teachers.

Research Type

This work aims to identify the learning strategies applied by a specific group of students regarding the study of English as a foreign language. (Descriptive research); with this information it might be possible to suggest some strategies to help learners enhance the learning process. (Proposing research).

Instruments

For collecting the primary information a frequency survey and interviews will be used. These instruments were

chosen because they provide the specific information needed to describe the cognitive strategies used by students. This information will be the basis for making suggestions on ways of incorporating language learning strategies to the teaching and learning process.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

In this paper, the highest and lowest frequencies of occurrence of cognitive strategies used by the advanced learners of the linguistics and language department will be accounted for with the purpose of making an agreed interpretation with the theoretical frame and the educational experience. Moreover, and in order to clarify the results statistic graphics will be used.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

For the interpretation and analysis of the data, the information was tabulated and analyzed in a quantitative way and interpreted in a qualitative way. The outcomes are presented using graphics to show the percentage (relative frequency) and bar graphics to show the number of students (accumulative frequency).

In this research we applied a questionnaire, which is made up by 14 questions and created by Oxford (1990), to 20 advanced learners of English at the University of Nariño. The instrument was intended to give us information about whether students use cognitive strategies or not as a way to improve their foreign language proficiency.

There are five possible options for students to choose and they are presented as follows:

1. Means NEVER
2. Means RARELY
3. Means SOMETIMES
4. Means ALMOST ALWAYS
5. Means ALWAYS.

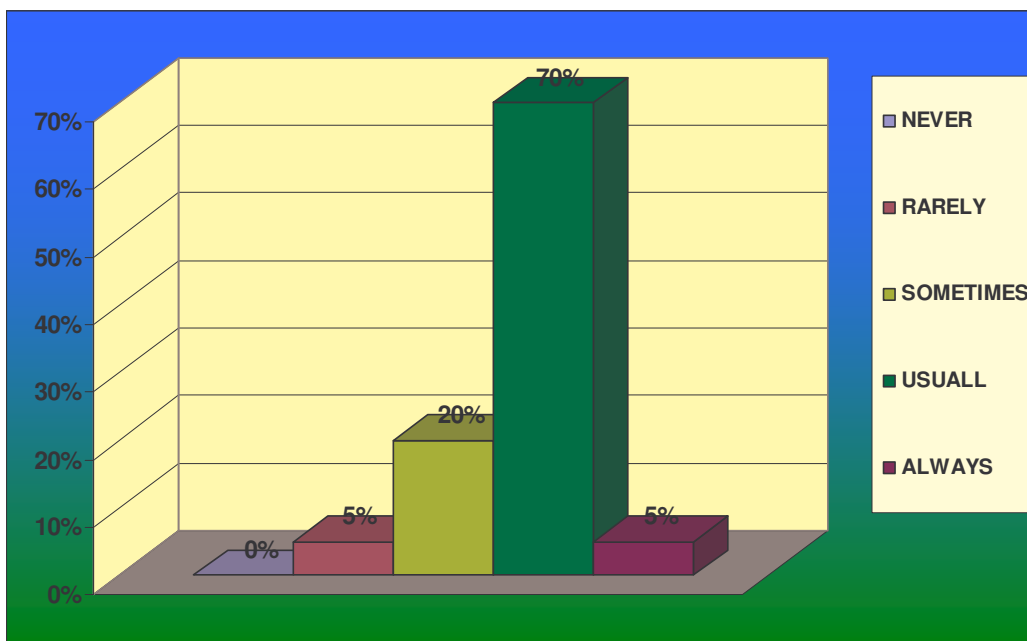
Besides, the 14 questions are divided into four categories: *practicing, analyzing and reasoning, creating structures for input and output and receiving and sending messages.*

The questions 1 to 8 belong to the cognitive strategy of practice and they are analyzed in the following way:

1. Say or write new English words several times

ANSWER	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	0	0%
2	1	5%
3	4	20%
4	14	70%
5	1	5%
TOTAL	20	

Table 1



Graphic 1

The 5% represented by 1 student always uses this strategy; 70% represented by 14 students almost always; the

20% represented by 4 students sometimes; and 5% represented by 1 student usually does not use this strategy.

The reason why most of the students stated that they almost always use this strategy might be that repeating or writing things repeatedly is a technique rather traditional and, according to our experience as foreign language learners in high school, teachers follow traditional methods such as GTM or ALM and they encourage learners to make use of this strategy in order to create correct "habits" in the L2. It might be suggested that although this strategy is highly used, it may not be equally effective since learners sometimes learn vocabulary lists but these are disconnected terms which do not have a context.

2. Try to talk like a native speaker

ANSWER	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	0	0%
2	2	10%
3	7	35%
4	9	45%
5	2	10%
TOTAL	20	

Table 2