Language Learning Strategies for Speaking Proficiency in Students from the English

and French Program at Universidad de Nariño

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NOTA DE ACEPTACIÓN

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Resumen

Las estrategias de aprendizaje cambian con el tiempo; hoy en día los estudiantes utilizan una variedad de estrategias para promover su propio aprendizaje. Es importante resaltar que las estrategias de aprendizaje trabajar a favor de los estudiantes haciéndolos proficientes; eso significa que son capaces de aprender más fácilmente mediante el uso de diferentes estrategias. Como consecuencia, los estudiantes que no están conscientes de que estrategias utilizar y aprovechar. Por eso, este estudio busca conocer a través de las experiencias de los estudiantes, las estrategias de aprendizaje del lenguaje comúnmente utilizadas por la mayoría de estudiantes proficientes de los semestres cuarto, sexto y octavo para obtener un mayor nivel de dominio al hablar inglés.

Posteriormente, será útil no solo para los estudiantes sino también para los profesores ya que sabrán las preferencias de sus alumnos para mejorar su metodología de enseñanza. La investigación será apoyada con el punto de vista de diferentes autores, por ejemplo: Rebecca Oxford, quien dice que las estrategias de aprendizaje juegan un papel importante en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. Por lo tanto, ayuda a los estudiantes a desarrollar la competencia lingüística de muchas formas (1990), y corrobora la importancia de las estrategias de aprendizaje en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua.

Abstract

In the process of teaching and learning a second language, it is very important to recognize the different factors that are involved, namely techniques, tools, or strategies that make students have more efficient results step by step. Those aspects play an important role in acquiring a second language from beginner to advanced levels. This project focuses on one of them: learning strategies, and its main objective is to identify the learning strategies commonly used by the most proficient students to enhance the speaking skill by analyzing the interviews applied to students from 4th, 6th and 8th semesters from the English and French program at the University of Nariño. This interview is designed to find out what strategies students prefer with the purpose of creating a resource of language learning strategies bank to be used by both teachers and students.

Key words: learning strategies, second language learning, proficient learners.

Table of Contents

Problem description

Through 4th, 6th and 8th semesters, there are different ways in which students improve their proficiency in English. It can be in writing, in speaking, in fluency, etc. However, not all of them achieve a good proficiency level, so this study intends to know what kind of learning strategies are applied by proficient students to learn a second language, in this case of English or French. It is important to mention that this research will be focused on the speaking skill for learning a second language.

Maybe, it is not only that students do not apply the appropriate strategy, but also that they do not know what strategies to apply because they have no idea about what kind of learners they are. For this reason, in this study, interviews will be conducted to know about the learning strategies that the most proficient students use to improve their speaking skill. In this way, students who are not good at language learning or do not have a good proficiency level can discover some ways to apply them or try to find what suits them better. By doing so, it will be possible to help less proficient students to identify their best way of learning the language and improve their proficiency level and develop their competences and skills. Teachers may also benefit by learning how to foster in students the strategies that could be the most appropriate for them.

Problem statement

The purpose of this research is to identify the learning strategies commonly used by most proficient students to develop their speaking skills by analyzing the results of students from 4th, 6th and 8th semesters.

Objectives

  General Objective. To identify what the common learning strategies that most proficient students use to improve their speaking skill in English by means of interviews.

  Specific Objectives.

1.   To create a resource language learning strategies bank for learners so that they can be aware of what strategies are suitable for them.

2.   To create a resource language learning strategies bank, so teachers will know what learning strategies are helpful for their students and incorporate these practices into the classroom.

Significance of the Study

Through the time that education and its processes have evolved, many aspects arose to answer some questions. Some questions that this study intends to answer are: What are the factors that make the learning process easier in students each time? What are the activities practiced by English learners to get better results? or what strategies or ways to learn have helped students to reach a good level of English in a specific skill?

Learning strategies are important in the students' English learning process. Since there are many kinds of students, there are also many ways and many activities they use to learn. Accordingly, the main reason why this study will be developed is due to the importance of knowing what the most common learning strategies used by proficient students in the English and French program are and having a clear idea about why they have those preferences. Once determined, it will be possible to create a list of language learning strategies that can work as a reference for students that have problems to improve their level of English in the speaking skill. Prompts will be given to students and teachers to find a set of strategies according to their interests.

Definition of Terms

Speaking. Speaking is a crucial part of second language learning and teaching (Cora & Knight, 2000). It is defined as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, the participants, and the purposes of speaking (Burns & Joyce, 1997). In here, different aspects need to be taken into account: fluency (good speed rate), accuracy (grammar/syntax), and appropriacy (appropriate use of words in context). Proficiency in speaking includes all these features, so when students are able to make a good use of the language, they can express their ideas clearly and without making serious mistakes. In addition, as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012) says, Speaking Proficiency is the ability to use language in real world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and in a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language. Proficiency demonstrates what a language user is able to do regardless of where, when, or how the language was acquired.

Learning Strategies. L2 strategies are defined as any strategies related to the L2, including strategies for learning or using the L2 (Cohen, 1998). L2 learning strategies are "specific actions, behaviors, steps, techniques (or thoughts) – 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 & Oxford, 1992, p. 63). L2 learning strategies can help learners improve their own perception, reception, storage, retention, and retrieval of language information. Examples of L2 learning strategies are planning for a language task, evaluating one's own learning, employing analysis to find the meaning of a word or expression, and asking questions (Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

Literature Review

Language learning is a complex process; it incorporates the development of 4 skills. One of them is speaking, which is probably one of the most difficult skills to master. Why is it so complex? Its complexity comes from the necessity from the human being to communicate; actually, this speaking skill is uncertain because it involves the acquisition of more detailed information, not only language aspects as grammar, but also the context. For English learners, it is complicated to express their thoughts effectively. In other words, is the importance to master the ability to communicate using another language what makes learners able to be proficient. According to Galloway 1987 and McNamara 1996, in the Applied Linguistics literature, although the word 'proficient' is often used interchangeably with words such as 'good', 'fluent', 'knowledgeable', 'bilingual', 'competent', and so on, it is not always clear what speaking proficiency entails; the term may be used quite differently from researcher to researcher. Some problems related to speaking proficiency may be solved through the use of suitable learning strategies.

There are studies that support the idea that being proficient is a key when learners are in the process of managing another language different from their mother tongue. The first one states that Spoken test performances representing five different tasks and five different proficiency levels (200 performances in all) were analyzed using a range of measures of grammatical accuracy and complexity, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. The results showed that features from each category helped distinguish overall levels of performance, with particular features of vocabulary and fluency having the strongest impact. Overall, the study contributes important insights into the nature of spoken proficiency as it develops and can be measured in rating scales for speaking. Taking into account the oxford´s taxonomy, the aspects that are inside speaking proficiency according to this study, are the ones that a learner obtains while using the direct strategies. On the

other hand, findings from a different study examined the componential structure of second-language (L2) speaking proficiency. Where 181 Participants from L2 and 54 native speakers of Dutch—performed eight speaking tasks and six tasks tapping nine linguistic skills. Showed that the performance in the speaking tasks was rated on functional adequacy by a panel of judges and formed the dependent variable in subsequent analyses (structural equation modeling). The following independent variables were assessed separately: linguistic knowledge in two tests (vocabulary and grammar); linguistic processing skills (four reaction time measures obtained in three tasks: picture naming, delayed picture naming, and sentence building); and pronunciation skills (speech sounds, word stress, and intonation). All linguistic skills, with the exception of two articulation measures in the delayed picture naming task, were significantly and substantially related to functional adequacy of speaking, explaining 76% of the variance. This provides substantial evidence for a componential view of L2 speaking proficiency that consists of language knowledge and language-processing components. These studies reported before, mention that the dominance of being proficient is matched not only by having the enough knowledge about the language, but also being competent when processing information and finally communicating. That's when language learning strategies start working, helping the learner to get an outstanding level and being distinguished from the others, later on it is explain what a language learning strategy is.

The term language learning strategy has been emphasized by several researchers. Rubin (1975) defined them as "any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to help the obtaining, storage, recovery, and use of information" (p. 19). Richards and Platt (1992) saw them as "intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information" (p. 209). Oxford (1990), one of the first to undertake research in this area, describes language

learning strategies as techniques intentionally used by learners to advance their

improvement in acquiring, storing, retaining, and using information in second or foreign

language.

Rubin and Naiman (1995), in their research, tried to find some strategies used by

good language learners when learning a second language. Rubin (1975) found that there are

some strategies used by the learner to enhance learning. Naiman and Frohlich (1978) made

a list of strategies used by successful language learners; Naiman et al. (1978) agree that the

kind of strategies are important for the learning process and make a difference between

good and poor language learners. This assertion implies that differences in terms of

language learning may be accounted for by the type of strategies they use to process the

language and learn it.

According to Green and Oxford (1995) and Wharton (2000), the use of language

learning strategies is consistently related to language proficiency. This study was carried

out to discover strategy use among ESL students in Malaysian secondary schools to look

further at the implication of their strategy use with regards to inter-cultural communication.

Oxford's SILL (strategy inventory for language learning) Questionnaire was administered

to 180 secondary school students and SPSS 7.0 version was used for analysis. Findings

revealed the dominance of indirect learning techniques, which regulate the learning process

through supporting and managing language learning without direct engagement; meaning

high anxiety, dependence heavily on peers and teachers to learn English and fewer practice

of the oral language. The study recommends the teaching of learning techniques to students

and positive exploitation of core-curricular activities that will create and sustain constant

practicing of English language among students to facilitate inter-cultural communication.

Overall, it is agreed that using language learning strategies has a positive influence on

language proficiency. Apparently, good language learners create and combine their use of particular types of strategies in effective ways (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

In their study, O'Malley and Chamot reviewed the literature on learning strategies. These authors described and classified learning strategies in second language learning, then they discussed why learning is affected in a positive manner when such strategies are used. The authors present instructional models for learning-strategy training that teachers can apply to their own classes. To complement this, another study done at Jing Liu School of Foreign Languages in China, called Language Learning Strategies and Its Training Model, summarized and reviewed the literature regarding language learning strategies and its training model. O'Malley and Chamot point out the significance of language learning strategies for EFL learners and also suggest an applicable and effective language learning strategies training model, which is beneficial both to EFL learners and instructors.

In addition, Oxford (2003) intended to find the relationship between learning a second language through sociocultural and psychological aspects and the influence that styles or learning strategies have in this process involving the fours skills. The author also took into account other variables such as: age, motivation, tasks, level of proficiency, etc. Another aspect that the author mentioned is that there are some differences in terms of use of strategies or learning styles between a second language and a foreign language learning. The answer may lie in the fact that in some cultures the language is the main vehicle to communicate or to express something but in other cultures the language is not purposeful at all. For that reason, how students learn a new language can vary. There are general plans to accomplish a goal using specific strategies and they are important because students find a suitable strategy that facilitates the learning making it easier, enjoyable, more self-directed and more effective, improving their perceptions and reception about the language.

Knowing what learning strategies are is important to have a better understanding of the aspects behind, for example: the age, motivation, the relation that students have with learning styles and tasks, the influence of the culture at the moment to learn something new, why culture affects the learning process and how it works into the student perception. Those aspects are important to have a big, general and solid concept about how learning strategies have to be seen and interpreted (Oxford, 2003). Besides these contributions, Oxford also classified language learning strategies. Her categorization of language learning strategies included two main types: Direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies comprise memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies while indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990). Those categories are going to be used to give teachers a better understanding of the different learning strategies that they can use to enhance their English Learning process in students. What this study aims to do is to get all the information about the strategies used by students. Then the first step is to group the strategies drawn from the data that will be collected into three big groups: Individual, pair, and group work (See Appendix 2). After that, the strategies will by classified into the Oxford Taxonomy taking into account their nature and features.

Firstly, Direct strategies are divided into three categories as follows (Kunasaraphana, 2015):

1. Memory strategies relate to how students remember language in order to store and retrieve new information.

   a) Creating mental linkages (grouping, associating/elaborating, placing new words into a context)

b) Applying images and sound (using imagery, semantics mapping, using keywords, representing sounds in memory)

c) Reviewing well (structured reviewing)

d) Employing action (using physical response or sensation, using mechanical techniques)

2. Cognitive strategies relate to how students think about their learning, comprehend and perform new language by various methods ranging from repeating to analyzing and summarizing.

a) Practicing (repeating, formally practicing with sounds and writing systems, recognizing and using formulas and patterns, recombining, practicing naturalistically)

b) Receiving and sending (getting the idea quickly, using resources for receiving and sending messages)

c) Analyzing and reasoning (reasoning deductively, analyzing expressions, analyzing contrastively, translating, transferring)

d) Creating structure for input and output (taking notes, summarizing, highlighting)

3. Compensation strategies enable students to make up for their limited knowledge and overcome limitations in target language skills.

a) Guessing intelligently (using linguistics clues, using other clues)

b) Overcoming limitation in speaking and writing (switching to the mother tongue, getting help, using mime or gesture, avoiding communication partially or totally, selecting the topic, adjusting or approximating the message, coining words, using a circumlocution or synonym)

Secondly, Indirect strategies include three categories as follows:

1. Metacognitive strategies involve the ways students manage their learning, establish their cognition, arrange plan and evaluate their progress.

a) Centering your learning (overviewing and linking with already known material)

b) Arranging and planning your learning (finding out about language learning, organizing, setting goals and objectives, identifying the purpose of a language task, planning for a language task, seeking practice opportunities)

c) Evaluating your learning (self-monitoring, self-evaluating)

2. Affective strategies relate to students' feelings, emotional reaction and anxiety.

a) Lowering your anxiety (using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation, using music, using laughter)

b) Encouraging yourself (making positive statements, taking risks wisely, rewarding yourself)

c) Taking your emotional temperature (listening to your body, using a checklist, writing a language learning diary, discussing your feelings with someone else)

3. Social strategies involve learning interaction with others.

a) Asking questions (asking for clarification, for correction or verification)

b) Cooperating with others (cooperating with peers, with proficient users)

c) Empathizing with others (developing cultural understanding, becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings)

Some local evidence that supports the taxonomy offered by Oxford is a study carried out by Figueroa and Robles (2009). It took place in a public High School in Pasto

(Nariño), the group of participants was formed by 40 to 50 students from 6th grade including men and women between 10 and 12 years old. Their main objective was to determine whether direct language learning strategies influenced the learner's speaking skill. They not only applied a pre-test and a post test, but also conducted a 20-hour intervention using direct language strategies. The outcomes of this study showed that the effects produced by applying direct language learning strategies on the speaking skill are positive as well as meaningful.

The perspective that teachers have at the moment to plan and address a class play an important role in the student´s learning process. In the same line, Gutierrez E. et al. (2017) support the idea that it is important to make teachers aware of effective strategies that foster students' second language learning. The study involved 26 students from a 10th grade class between the ages of 14 and 18 years old. The main objective was the analysis of the factors that influenced the lack of speaking. It also approached the effectiveness of the strategies, teaching resources as well as the teacher style used to teach the class. The data collected was meant to enhance teachers' and students' performance and the methodology used in the study consisted of a teacher´s interview, students´ survey questionnaire and class observation. As a result, the information gathered showed that the teacher should use more resources to gain students engagement in the speaking activities applied in English classes. One of this resources could be found in the outcomes of this research project, which is the language learning strategies bank for teachers.

The study to develop has to do with learning strategies and their importance in the English language learning field helping students to achieve a higher proficiency. In this sense, it is essential to highlight some important aspects that Griffiths (2013) mentions in her thesis "Language Learning Strategy use and Proficiency". This research was carried out in a private language school in Auckland and consisted of three stages. Part A, Section 1

used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990) as the basic instrument to investigate the relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency and to examine the strategy patterns used by more proficient students. Part A, Section 2 used the same data to investigate language learning strategy use according to learner variables (nationality, gender, age). Part B used interviews to investigate language learning strategy use by individuals, and Part C used a classroom based program to explore means of instructing students in language learning strategy use and also to construct an original questionnaire using student input (the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory or ELLSI). This questionnaire was used to investigate the relationship between language learning strategy use and proficiency and changes in strategy use over time as well as teachers' perspectives on language learning strategy use.

The results revealed a significant relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency (a finding supported by the results of the ELLSI study) and also significant differences in strategy use according to nationality. The interviews showed useful insights regarding the use of language learning strategies by individuals, and it was found that those students who made the most progress were the ones who had increased the frequency of their language learning strategy use. In addition, the results of the teachers' survey indicated that teachers regarded language learning strategies as highly important, an encouraging result in terms of positive implications for a good accord between teachers and students in the teaching/learning situation. That is what this research aims to do. Also, previous research, as mentioned in Griffiths' thesis, says that the characteristics of learners, depending on their performance, are different; therefore, they should be taken separately.

Griffiths' (2013) perception, helps to emphasize how important learning strategies are to enhance proficiency, and the results show the effectiveness of learning strategies since they really work. Even, if there has been previous research about Learning strategies

that say that they have been used inappropriately, this study aims to create a different perspective and try to find all the possible strategies that help learners to develop an easy acquisition process of the English language.

This study is entirely based on the meaning and ideas that Oxford put forward regarding learning strategies. As she said "Learning strategies play an important role in second/foreign language learning because they help learners develop language competence in many ways." (p.3). Empirical evidence has demonstrated that learning strategies that are used by proficient students can be learned by those less proficient; This implies that teachers need to assist learners in creating or applying strategies that help them with their language learning process. These ideas can also find support in another study conducted by Cohen (1998), who states that "learners are being encouraged to learn and use a broad range of language learning strategies that can be selected throughout the learning process. " (p.205, links&letters7). It was based on the belief that learning would be facilitated by making students aware of the variety of strategies from which they can choose during language learning and use.

Methodology for Research

Design

To conduct this study, the qualitative research was selected, which according to Bryman (2008) is a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as a multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials case study, personal experience, introspective, life story interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts-that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives. As the description of people lives and their experiences are essential for this research, the qualitative design was chosen because there is the necessity to go beyond a simple answer.

Method

Phenomenology is the most suitable method for this study. It focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Typically, interviews are conducted with a group of individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event, situation or experience. This method is suitable for research because its focus is on students' experiences. The study will be developed with interviews to obtain the necessary information from students, so they will have to answer some questions (See Appendix 1).

Population

This study will be developed with a total of 90 students from the 4th, 6th and 8th semesters registered in the English and French program from the Linguistics and Languages Department at the University of Nariño.

Sample

In this study, there will be 9 participants, three students from each of the aforementioned semesters. The group comprises men and women whose ages range between 18 to 25 years old. The qualifying feature is the fact that they must have a good level of proficiency in speaking. In order to determine their proficiency, the help of the teachers in charge was necessary. They provided information on who had the most remarkable speaking ability in the class. In this way, the opinion and performance of students should be taken into account.

Data Collection Instruments

For this research, the students will be chosen intentionally and to get the necessary information from them, it was needed to design an interview, so they will have to answer some specific questions. (See appendix 1).

Data collection procedure

The study will first require the help of teachers working in developing the Listening and Speaking skills from each semester to give their perception about the best students from the class. These students will be the ones to answer the interview, and it will be necessary to talk to them in advance to know their availability to conduct the interview.

Pilot study

The purpose of this research is to know what learning strategies the most proficient students from 4th, 6th, and 8th semesters use to develop their speaking skills by means of an interview as a data collection instrument. In this sense, this pilot study aimed to check if the interview was suitable and would lead to answer the research question as accurately as possible.

This procedure involved three (3) students, one from each semester, and it took from 5 to 10 minutes per student. Taking into account the students' time availability, they were asked to answer the interview in their free time.

Pilot Study Results

This pilot study was developed on October 16th with three students from 4th, 6th, and 8th semester; randomly, we selected one student per semester. Then they were taken outside the classroom to give us their consent to develop the interviews and record them. During the development of the interview, we realized that two students had difficulties with the term "strategy;" they did not know what it meant; it was confusing for them, so we had to explain to them in a simpler way what a strategy is. Also, one of the students had trouble with the word "enhance." Therefore, we had to give him a synonym that allowed him to understand better the question to continue with the interview.

In addition, it was found that the information collected was initially not enough to answer the research question, so we decided to add two more questions that are focused on the preferences of students and to change the words that students had problem with by other words easier for them to understand (See appendix 2).

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis procedure that will be used in this study is *categorization,* which Given (2008) defines as a big element of qualitative data analysis where researchers try to group patterns observed in the data into relevant units or categories; through this process, categories are made by joining groups of previously coded data.

This procedure is the best for this study because it will help to classify the different strategies that good students use to improve their fluency in speaking. In this regard, a chart will be used to classify the strategies collected in the study, from the big concept to the smaller one; in other words, learning strategies in the speaking ability is divided into the activities used by good students. These activities have been classified into two subcategories: in class and out of class, then we have that these two include individual work, pair work and group work (See Appendix 2). Later, these will be analyzed taking into account the taxonomy put forward by Oxford (1990).

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Appendix 1

University of Nariño

Linguistics and Languages Department

English and French Program

INTERVIEW

Dear participant, this interview seeks to know what learning strategies students from 4th, 6th and 8th semester from English and French program of the University of Nariño are using to improve their level of proficiency in learning English. The purpose of this interview is to have a clear outlook about what the most common learning strategies that you as a student of English as a second language are using to help your learning process and to know the reasons why you have those preferences, through a qualitative research by interviewing you as a participant. It is important to mention that the data collected during this research will be recorded and will be used only for academic purposes.

Background information

Name _____

Semester: _____   **Age: _____**   **Female____ Male____**

How much time have you been studying English? _____

Questions

● Why do you study English?

- What activities do you like from your English classes?

- What additional activities do the teacher assign you to practice your speaking?

- Do you think that the speaking practice you do at university and out of it is enough to improve your speaking skill?

- What additional activities do you develop to improve your speaking ability apart from the ones the teacher provides?

- What learning strategy or strategies do you think have helped you the most to improve your English-speaking ability?

- What learning strategy or strategies do you like the most?

- How do you think this or these strategies have worked?

Appendix 2

	Activities	
CATEGORIES	*In class*	*Out of class*
Individual work		
Pair work		
Group work		