

# LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## **Abstract**

*The world status of English language appears through the increasing number of people using, learning and teaching it. English has become the most dominant global language. It became the first and the main language of international business, economy, science and technology and tourism, hence, English language teaching and learning became a necessary process in this era. Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) demands both writing and speaking such language. Learning the language requires the use of different strategies applied by both the teachers and the learners. The learner is the target of both teaching and learning a language; both processes seek to achieve the same goal which is acquiring a foreign language. Thus, this paper focused on the learning strategies which can be applied by the learners to reach effective acquisition of the English language.*

Students' learning strategies as defined by Oxford (2005) refers to operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information. It involves specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, effective and more transferable to new situations. Language learning strategies (LLS) have been defined by many scholars in different ways. According to Derry and Murphy (2005) learning strategies are a collection of mental tactics employed by an individual in a particular learning situation to facilitate acquisition of knowledge or skill. Also Ellis (2004) defined language learning strategies as strategies consisting of mental and behavioural activities related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use.

From the foregoing it can be observed that language learning strategies (LLS) are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and which directly affect learning. The strategies are the special thoughts and or behaviours that learners use to help them understand, learn or retain new information. Thus, language learning strategies are the techniques which help the individual learner to discover new information, learning it accurately and achieving higher response.

However, to learn a language means to develop a new symbol system made up of words consciously learnt through formal study. The process of language learning is one of the most important issues that students face mainly in educational spheres. Such process simply refers to the acquisition of the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and focus on the development of the ability to communicate, that is, communicative competence. Communicative competence is a linguistic term which requires the use of grammatical knowledge like phonology, syntax, morphology, how and when this knowledge should be used. In order to have communicative competence learners employ different strategies to help them.

In English language learning, learners face various difficulties due to the fact that the nature of their first language or mother tongue is different from English such as the case of English and Nigerian languages. Language learners produce errors of vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation as a consequence of the interference of their mother tongue. English has two basic features- flexibility and openness of vocabulary. Words are divided into verbs or nouns which can be identical, a feature which poses difficulty for learners of English as a foreign language. In a bid to overcome these challenges, learners choose different strategies considering some factors.

## **Types of Language Learning Strategies Employed by Learners**

Learners, in order to make learning effective, use various strategies that help them in their way of learning. According to Chen (2012) four types of language learning strategies are suggested. These are comprehension strategies, memory strategies, production strategies and communication strategies.

### **A. Comprehension strategies**

These are strategies used to understand the language or what Krashen called comprehensible input. They include selective attention strategy, inference strategy, top-- down processing strategy, deduction strategy, analysis strategy and transfer strategy. Selective attention means to select and pay attention to a particular task at a given time. For example, a learner listening to a speaker may concentrate only on the speaker's intonation. Inference strategy involves filling the blanks from what one comprehends. It means to guess the meaning from the context. Top-- down processing strategy is a desirable strategy used to discover meaning of some words in discourse from what one knows. For instance, when one hears someone talk about family. Deduction strategy is used when one reasons from known to the unknown and from general to the specific such as if the learner knows that regular verbs in the past tense end with "ed" so he can deduce that "played" is the past tense form of "play". Analysis strategy refers to examining words in meaningful parts to get the meaning. Learners can analyze the word "hyperactive" to capture its meaning. The first part "hyper" means too much, so when combined with "active" to mean more active than usual. Finally, the transfer strategy is used to understand one language by using the knowledge of the language. It can be positive when there are similarities between the two languages or negative when there are differences.

### **B. Memory strategies:**

The strategies here include: word associations strategy, visual association strategy, action association strategy, grouping strategy, imagery strategy, contextualization strategy, repetition strategy, recombination strategy and structured review strategy. The word association strategy is to create a link between one word and others. It can be between one word and the opposite such as 'high' and 'low', or between one word and what can go with it like "bread and butter". The visual association strategy is used to make a link between what you learn and what you see. For example, one looking at a picture and describing it according to what one has learnt. The action association strategy is to associate what one learns with action such as associating their lesson in science to what they have experienced. The grouping strategy is to group words in a way in order to remember it very well.

It can be on the basis of topics such as words about education or on communication functions such as thanks and request. The imagery strategy is all about linking a mental image to the new language information. This depends on the extent of imagination. Contextualization strategy on the other hand involves putting words in appropriate context that helps the learner remember them. Repetition strategy is to do or say something repeatedly until one masters it. This is used to learn correct pronunciation of words. Recombination strategy is to combine words one has taken from one context in different ways. Like the use of collocation. Lastly, structured review strategy is to review the same things learnt at different intervals, first at short intervals, later at longer intervals.

### **C. Production strategies**

Production strategies are those strategies used for retrieving and using stored information. It consists of mimicry strategy and the rehearsal strategy. In mimicry strategy, the learner mimics the native speaker's pronunciation and waits for feedback. Through this, learners compare their pronunciation with the native speaker's pronunciation and wait for feedback. Rehearsal strategy refers to the practice of repeating some knowledge before using it in real life communication.

### **D. Communication strategy**

This is simply used to convey and communicate meaning. The strategies here include circumlocution strategy, message adjustment strategy and the code- switching. Circumlocution strategy is used to describe a concept in other words or in phrase. For example, one saying that he has a book which explains meanings of words instead of simply saying that he has a dictionary. Message adjustment strategy is used to avoid saying something one does not know how to say. Code switching strategy is to move from one language to another within the same sentence. For instance, using a Nigerian native language within an English language sentence.

### **Factors Affecting the Choice of Language Learning Strategies**

Language learners make use of different strategies to acquire the new language. However, during the selection of the suitable strategies, certain variables may influence their choice. The factors include motivation, gender, age, nationality, learning and tolerance background, learning proficiency, attitudes, beliefs and tolerance of ambiguity.

- **Motivation:** This refers to the learner's overall goals or orientation. According to Oxford (2005) learners with high motivation tend to use a great number of learning strategies than the less motivated learners.
- **Age:** is also an important variable. Learners of different ages use different strategies. Beginners may use special strategies like repetition, while the intermediate can use another strategies like the analyses of the text of expression.
- **Learning proficiency:** From the study carried out by Chamot (2004). it was discovered that more proficient language learners use learning strategies more than less proficient language learners. This accounts for why, after learning English for a period of time in a class, some will be successful while others are not.
- **Learning style:** This depends on the type of student a learner is for instance, analytical- style students use some strategies like "dividing words and phrases" while overall students use strategies such as guessing the meaning.
- **Cultural background:** This plays a big role in language learning, whereby the students select the learning strategies suitable to their cultural background. Here the students using imagery strategy links the information to a mental image they have from their cultural background.
- **Attitude:** It refers to a set of beliefs about the subject of learning. The students that have positive attitudes and beliefs use learning strategies more than those who have negative attitude.
- **Nationality:** Nationality is an important factor in the choice of learning strategies. Griffiths (2004) argued that students of European nationality use more language learning strategies than the students of other nationalities. This may be as a result of the technological development of the nation which is far above others.

### **Language Learning Strategies in English Language Classroom**

Practice, they say makes perfect, hence practical use of language learning strategies has a crucial function in the learning process. Without practice, nothing can be effectively learned. In language learning, practice involves listening, speaking, reading and writing which are all related in the language learning process. The four basic language skills are further classified into two categories which are the receptive skills and the productive skills. The receptive skills include listening and reading while the productive skills include both speaking and writing. At this point the language learners have to integrate the skills so as to acquire the language properly. There are different strategies that will help the students have a grasp of both the receptive and production skills.

### **Receptive Skills Strategies**

The receptive skills strategies help the learners to receive and understand the target language, allow them to build their performance and help the learners to recall. Reading is the activity that learners carry out pronouncing what is written in a given script. It could be an essay, a novel, a letter, a book or a story. The learner, through reading, can get a lot information or knowledge. Reading has some techniques and strategies that determine how the readers can conceive a task, how they understand what they read and what they should do when they do not understand a passage. These techniques consists of a whole range of strategies including skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, reading for meaning, self- monitoring, inferencing and others.

**a. Skimming (getting the general picture)** – Involves reading a text in order to get the general idea. In doing this, learners should focus only on the most important parts of the text. They can predict the general idea from the title and subheading.

**b. Predicting (guessing meaning from context):** This is the most useful technique. It requires the use of previous knowledge about a specific topic, and combines it with the new material in text. It is a very effective technique in activating the learners prior knowledge, which plays a very important role in reading.

c. **Inference:** Making inferences is very valued and indispensable. In reading. Inferencing requires actively interacting with the words in a sentence and among sentences. According to Macaro (2001) to help students develop strategies and knowledge to use internal and external context to infer meaning is a major step towards helping them become independent learners.

d. **Self-monitoring:** refers to the readers awareness in the selection of the appropriate strategy. Some researchers indicate that the proficient readers show more awareness of their use of strategies in reading English rather than the less proficient learners.

According to Chen (2012), listening is a communication skill used in the assimilation of information and the most neglected in foreign language teaching. It is the first skill that the learners should master in order to be proficient in language. There are two approaches under listening skill which are:

a. **Extensive listening:** Here the learner listens for general understanding or for the main ideas but does not pay attention to the meaning of the specific words or phrases. The learner is not subjected to questions afterwards.

b. **Intensive listening:** The learners listens for the second time. Here one listens to get more detailed information so that one can answer detailed comprehension question.

Using both extensive and intensive listening strategy in a foreign language classroom will be good and helpful for the learners to get many vocabulary of the language. Listening is regarded as a primary approach to improve the proficiency of the learners. It is necessary to apply a number of listening strategies in order to understand. The strategies are divided into two common types.

1. Cognitive strategy and 2. Meta-cognitive strategy.

**Cognitive strategy:** has to do with the mental act which is linked to the comprehending and storing of knowledge (the memory). It involves the following processes:

a. Comprehension process: associated with linguistic and non-linguistic input

b. Storing or the long-term memory

c. Using process: accessing memory for output

**Meta-cognitive strategy:** has to do with conscious or unconscious mental activities that play an important role in the management and organization of the cognitive strategies. The useful aspects in these activities according to Griffiths (2004) are as follows:

a. **Assessing the situation:** refers to using one's available internal and external resources and the constraints of the situation before engaging in a task.

b. **Self-monitoring:** involves determining the effectiveness of one's performance while carrying out an activity.

c. **Self-evaluation:** determining the effectiveness of another's performance after engaging in an activity

d. **Self-testing:** refers to testing the language use of one's performance

### **The Productive Skills**

The productive skills are regarded as the active skills. They emphasize the participation of the learners through the learning process either by speaking or writing. They may be seen as being difficult skills since learners at this level cannot produce linguistic items perfectly as the English native speakers. Being productive results in providing a large amount or supply of something that has positive result. So, in language learning, the learners are expected to have higher level of language input (through listening and reading) in order to have a chance to produce a comprehension output (through speaking and writing). Speaking is a productive skill that the learners do through exchange of the language with others. It is a linguistic activity which consists of several elements such as: Pronunciation (sound), morphology and lexis (words and their parts), grammar and syntax (structure/ semantics, discourse (conversation and utterances). Pragmatics (usage and its rules), fluency (ease of speech, confidence, coherence and speed) and topicality (themes and ideas).

Every speaker- native or non-native- have different levels of competence and fluency in their interactions and styles. Richard (2008), stated that the mastery of speaking skill in English is a priority to many second language or foreign language learners. Learners evaluate their success in language learning in terms of their feeling about how well they have improved in their spoken language proficiency. The strategies in speaking skill as suggested by Richard are:

❖ **Think-pair-share:** This is a general instructional strategy often applied in language learning situations because it enhances the use of speaking. This strategy gives the students the opportunity to formulate and practice an oral answer with a partner first before speaking to a large group.

❖ **Recasting:** Is a kind of feedback. It involves the teacher accepting the student's attempt and reframing it as a question with the correct content. Using this strategy is a way of offering oral feedback to students in a non-threatening way.

❖ **Impromptu Speaking:** is a language learning strategy that makes the student to respond to something orally without much preparation in order to develop spontaneous speaking fluency. The use of this strategy helps to promote conversational fluency and get a sense of what learners are thinking at that moment.

Writing in a foreign language is more complex than other skills. Researchers agree that writing is interrelated with other language skills, especially speaking and reading. It is a process of composing a given script. The productive skill is based on making marks which represent letters, words or numbers on a surface such as paper or a computer screen using different materials like pencil, pen, keyboard, etc. writing develops phonic knowledge and enhances reading fluency. In this strategy, students are expected to write multiple draft on a paper and make changes in their draft based on the feedback they receive, According to Richard (2008), writing, in addition to being a communicative skill of vital importance, is a skill which enables the learner to plan and rethink the communication process. Therefore, it provides the learner with the opportunity to focus on both linguistic accuracy and content organization. The process of writing also has a number of strategies:

❖ **Free writing:** This is a language learning strategy whereby the students are asked to write for a short period of time as a warm up activity. The teacher does not collect it from the student rather it is to involve their previous knowledge.

❖ **Brainstorming:** It is a writing strategy that asks students to come up with many ideas about a topic, without limitation. It is used as an active learning stimulus.

❖ **Process writing and Journaling:** Journaling simply refers to the practice of asking students, informally, to write down their thoughts as they go about doing something. Processing writing, on the other hand, refers to formal writing of an essay or paper down their thoughts as they go about doing something. Processing writing, on the other hand, refers to formal writing of an essay or paper that describes how to do something step by step. In practicing this, students can write short journal entries on how they use libraries before writing a formal process essay on how to use the library. Using these writing strategies and other familiar ones can further students' language learning beyond the classroom.

The four basic language skills are interwoven. In reality, language process enhances the students ability to use the other.

## **Conclusion**

Every language learner aims at being proficient in that language. Language learning strategies are considered as useful ways which facilitate and improve language learning and help learners in different ways to achieve their aim. Good language learners should take responsibility for their own learning and organize information about language. The English language is a foreign language to many students, therefore, it requires using different strategies to gain proficiency

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