

A Study of the Language Learner Strategies Adopted by Nigerian Students

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Abstract: Nigerian students learn and eventually use English as a Second Language (ESL) having acquired at least one of the numerous Nigerian languages as mother tongue (L1). Consequently, learning English in such an ESL environment must take into cognizance some useful strategies that are capable of assisting the English language learner in the Nigerian setting. However, teachers as well as students usually fail to benefit from the numerous opportunities offered by language learner strategies in the course of either language teaching or learning. The written and spoken expressions of Nigerian students in English are generally poor. They obviously need to function adequately well in English since it is the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools. It is on this note that this study aims to attempt a detailed study of the language learner strategies usually adopted in Nigerian schools. It is the position of this study that Nigerian students must be well exposed to all the language learning strategies. They must also be aware that no singular strategy can adequately meet their functional needs.

Key words: ESL, mother tongue, opportunities, adequately, singular strategy, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian learners of English are essentially bilinguals. Therefore, they face a lot of problems learning the language. Commenting on the problems of the second language learners of English who do not learn it naturally as native speakers, Verghese (2007) complains thus:

So, learning it is not as natural ... as it is to the native speaker. The native speaker of English has imbibed the language with his mother's milk; he has become familiar with the components of English in the natural process of growing up. For the ESL learner, learning is essentially a deliberate effort geared towards developing a command and control of the different components of the language its phonology (the sound system), its morphology (the patterns and parts of words) and its syntax (the patterns of phrases and sentences)

The all important question is how can Nigerian students master these components of English when they learn it as L2? The importance of English in the Nigerian society and especially as the language of education cannot be over-emphasized. The truth of the matter is that failure in English is synonymous with failure in education. Ayeomoni (1999) asserts that English holds the key to further academic progress after the secondary education. Bamisaye (2004) further concludes that the success or otherwise of a secondary school career depends on the learner's competence in English since he is expected to be taught and examined in all subjects (except the mother

tongue) in English. Many Nigerian children acquire their L1 before learning English. Indeed many of them first contact English at school. Bamisaye (2004) observes that the problem of a systematic and smooth transition from the home to school is always lacking in the Nigerian situation. He further states:

The language of the home is what the child is familiar with. The language of the school is entirely new and different. It takes the learner some considerable time to transit from the home language to the school language

This makes learning difficult for the child as the language of the home differs considerably from the language of the school. To worsen his situation, he is yet to master his L1 to the extent of achieving a high degree of competence in it.

The Nigerian learner may have to cope endlessly with the problems of interference, code-mixing and code-switching. He often times follows the rules of his L1 while speaking or writing English. It is in this sense that linguists have felt that the bilingual child runs the risk of confusing the two languages and even in some extreme cases suffer comparative failure in both. This is a concept earlier on described as double semi-lingualism. Such a child may not even achieve any reasonable level of proficiency in either his L1 or L2. It is in this wise that he may be said to have 2 sec languages. They are deficient in all the four language skills: listening, speaking (oracy skills), reading and writing (literary skills). This is a negation of the view of Ayeomoni (1999) who stresses

the importance of the language skills. Jowitt (1991) notes with grave concern that the quality of both spoken and written English of Nigerians has been deteriorating over a long period while Mohammed (1995) states that the poor performance in English is correlated with poor performance or failure in the other subjects taught through the medium of English.

At this juncture, a study of the language learning strategies employed by students in process of learning the language of education becomes relevant.

We hope to identify possible areas that the teachers and students may need some re-adjustments so as to enhance better performances on both teachers and students.

LANGUAGE LEARNER STRATEGIES

Williams (1990) underscores the importance of the language learners in planning language teaching activities. How the L2 learners master the complexities of a new grammatical system requires due attention. Cohen and Dornyei (2002) commenting on the importance of the characteristics of language learner, opine thus:

When students embark on the study of an L2, they are not merely vessels that will need to be filled by the wise words of the teachers instead, they carry a considerable personal baggage to the language course that will have a significant bearing on how learning proceeds

Cohen and Dornyei (2002) conclude that a student's own active and creative participation in the learning process via the medium of application of individualized learning techniques and not just a high degree of language aptitude and motivation usually make a learner to excel. Then they define language learning strategies as the conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviour used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language.

Learning strategies according to Cohen and Dornyei (2002) may include cognitive strategies which encompass identification, grouping retention and storage of language material as well as the language use strategies of retrieval, rehearsals and comprehension. The learners employ meta-cognitive strategies consciously so as to supervise or manage language learning as they plan, check and evaluate what is learnt. They equally use effective strategies to regulate emotions, motivation and attitudes (e.g., to reduce anxiety and for self-encouragement). Also, they employ social strategies as they choose certain

actions in order to interact with other learners and with native speakers (e.g., asking questions to clarify social roles and relationships).

There is therefore, the need to review the kinds of language learner strategies that are considered relevant. We shall consider the following: learning strategies, production strategies, communication strategies and self-motivating strategies.

LEARNING STRATEGIES

Williams (1990) posits that these are the ways in which language learners process language inputs and develop linguistic knowledge. Psycholinguists believe the process may be subconscious (unplanned) or conscious (deliberate). Overgeneralization of rules for instance is known to be subconscious while memorization of prefabricated or formulaic speech such as the routines and patterns employed by L1 and L2 learners is deemed conscious.

Such learning strategies are used by Nigerian students. For example, as L2 learners of English they memorise several rules of grammar but many a time they overgeneralise such rules.

Nigerian students tend to use a sort of bookish English (different from conversational type as learnt from pages of books. Akere (1984) comments on the implications of such an experience thus:

Most Nigerian users of English suffer from the linguistic problems deriving from the acquisition of a second language from a non-direct, textbook based language source

PRODUCTION STRATEGIES

According Williams (1990), they are employed by L2 learners in a bid to use the language in communication. It includes preplanning or rehearsal and correction of utterances. Production strategies indeed relates to the classification by skill area.

Here, we shall consider the receptive skills, listening and reading and the productive skills, speaking and writing which are the four basic categories. Learners equally use strategies associated with vocabulary learning which indeed cross-cut the four basic skills. They also employ the strategic use of translation in order to enhance both language learning and use. Nigerian students learning in English employ this strategy in their bid to master the language of education and functionally use it as well.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Like production strategies, they serve communication needs. They however differ in that they are used by L2 learners who lack appropriate linguistic knowledge to say what they want to say. Communication strategies are verbal or non-verbal first aid techniques used by learners to deal with problems or break-downs in communication (Cohen and Dornyei, 2002).

Such techniques, they conclude enable learners to remain as active partners in communication even when things are no longer in their control. They avoid problems by paraphrasing a word or concept, create more time to think and negotiate difficult parts of conversation with partner (s) until everything is clear.

The strategies include paraphrasing, substituting one word for another, borrowing from L1 avoiding certain structures etc. Interaction strategies and strategies for maintaining the floor are used.

It must be noted that Nigerian students usually employ the communication strategies obviously for communication purposes. However, conscious efforts must be made to ensure they use the other strategies in their bid to learn English.

SELF-MOTIVATING STRATEGIES

The self-motivating strategies do play a significant role in empowering learners to be more committed and enthusiastic language learners. Cohen and Dornyei (2002) claim that some learners even under adverse conditions in certain classrooms and without the assistance of any teacher are more successful at being committed to the goals they have set for themselves than others are. Such learners usually apply certain self management skills to overcome environmental distractions or distracting emotional or physical needs or states. They motivate themselves.

This is the crux of the matter. Many Nigerian students are not well motivated to study the medium of instruction.

They equally lack and consequently do not employ self-motivating strategies in their weak attempt to learn and use English. Raising learners awareness of self-motivation strategies and drawing attention to specific strategies that are especially useful in a given situation will definitely have significant empowering effect on the students.

LANGUAGE LEARNER STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY NIGERIAN STUDENTS

It is note-worthy that at school many Nigerian students feel rather timid to speak English to teachers and peers too for the fear of being mocked should they commit errors of grammar or pronunciation. There is therefore, the need for increased social interactions in the schools. Sociolinguists believe that social interactions in which the child participates directly in the alternating roles of speaker and listener are among the most important experience for the child developing communicative competence. Richards and Rodgers (1986) present such valuable activities as stated:

Social interaction activities include conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues, role-plays, simulations, skits, improvisations and debates

In the same vein, Verghese (2007) concludes thus:

The total process of learning a second-language involves far more than simply learning the forms of the language; it also involves a knowledge of the culture of those who speak the language

Pickard (1996) stresses the importance of out of class or out of school language learning potentials noting that they are usually learning activities that are termed student initiated activities. However, many Nigerian students do not interact in English out of class or out of school.

Psycholinguists are of the opinion that personality is inseparably related to a language user's cognitive style. Also, L2 researchers have discovered that the following personality traits have implications on the success or otherwise of L2 learning: aptitude, motivation, attitude and empathy.

Teachers of English as a matter of urgency must make themselves conversant with all the strategies so as to teach their students. In like manner, teachers should henceforth expose their students to the various language learning strategies so as to fast-track English language learning in Nigerian schools.

CONCLUSION

In practical terms, English language learners should be made to know the basic tenets of the various strategies. They should know when best to apply each strategy for maximum results. They must bear in mind that no single strategy can achieve all the goals of language learners. To achieve a particular purpose, a learner may have to combine two or more suitable and relevant strategies.

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