Language Learning Strategies and Individual (Students') Characteristics in the Classroom

Mrs. Ihedioha Love N. Ph.D
National Institute for Nigerian
Languages, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria
e-mail address: lovedioha@yahoo.com

Abstract: A precondition for the realization of the adaptive teaching and learning process in the school is the knowledge of the individual learning characteristics in the classroom contexts. Individual learning characteristics often relate to demographic information like age, gender, maturation, language, socio-economic status, cultural background and the specific needs of the learner group such as particular skills and abilities for or impaired to learning. The study was conducted with 124 public secondary school students in 4 schools in Aba metropolis. The study adopted a self-structured questionnaire instruments which included demographic questionnaire and Oxford's strategy inventory for language learning. The study used a descriptive survey research which aimed to examine the Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and individual characteristics in the classroom. The arithmetic mean and frequency was used in analyzing data collected from the participants. The findings revealed that the participants who were good at English mostly used cognitive strategies while memory strategy was used by the participants with less English proficiency.

Keywords: Language, Learning strategies, Individual characteristics

Introduction

Language Learning Strategies are terms referring to the processes and actions that are consciously deployed by language learners to help them learn or use a language more effectively (Shatz, 2014; Heath, 2015). Language learning strategy have been defined as thoughts and actions consciously chosen and operationally by learners to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very outset of learning to the most advanced levels of target language performance (Cohen, 2011).

Heath (2015) states that the language learning strategies which incorporated strategies used for Language learning and Language use is sometimes used, though the line between the two is ill defined as moments of second language (L_2) use itself as a defining feature of culture and an unmistakable mark of personal identity, is essential for forming interpersonal relationships, understanding, social situations, extending experience,

reflecting on thought and action and contributing to a democratic society. Language is also a primary base of all communication and the primary instrument of thought in the classroom environment just like in the family and/or in the workplace. Language in the family is a tool for communication and interaction as well as in the workplace and in all human environs.

Classroom environment is an important determinant of student learning in an educational system. Students can learn better when they perceive the classroom environment more positively, thus environment is to educators, researchers, school administrators, parents and the society at large. Based on the Vygoksky's (1978) theory of social cognitive development, the classroom environment becomes the "culture" that determines students' learning development. In the classroom, students' learning development takes place when interactions between them and the teachers occur among them, with existence of friendship (high affiliation and learner support in the classroom), students' level of learning would be improved.

In the classroom also individual learner qualities such as general self-esteem and self-concept, long term interests, deep seated motivation traits, aptitudes (example, cognitive, social, artistic), cognitive styles, personality traits and long standing personal beliefs are part of the patterns of individual characteristics found among learners. Language Learning Strategies (LLS) use can help to improve self-esteem, remold self-concept in positive ways, strengthen aptitude and make cognitive styles more flexible, increase willingness to communicate and alter personal beliefs (Oxford, 2012).

Individual characteristics like age, gender, sexuality, religion, socio-economic status and education level, affect LLS use. Some demographics are more changeable than others (Oxford, 2012). Age changes un-increasingly acknowledged. With motivation, effort and learning strategies, learning can improve and education level might lead to higher socio-economic status.

Classroom contexts according to Abas (2015) are small cultures.
For a given learner, classroom contextual elements include task demands, assessments, materials, desks, books, "climate" (individual quality, physical and emotional safety) and the other students' actions and beliefs, all of which can influence a person's LLS use. All LLS use affects the classroom especially the teacher's actions after witnessing LLS use such as praise, mediation, classroom-climate efforts, and evaluation of learners (as strategies or not, capable or not motivated or not) (Abas, 2015).

Ushioda's (2009) person-context relation view is related to LLS use because it centers on the agency of the individual person as a thinking feeling human being with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intensions. Ushioda (2009) brought attention to contexts, as did Dornyel, Mcintyre and Henry (2005) and Mercer (2015; 2016).

Every human has personal characteristics that can contribute in the language learning acquisition in the classroom (Abas, 2015). These characteristics include age, gender,

intelligence, aptitude, maturation and attitude, personality, learning styles and environment. With regard to it, the present paper attempts to explore the theoretical framework of individual learning strategies and characteristics in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework
Individual Language Learning Strategies and Classroom Characteristics

Individual language learning strategies (LLS) and characteristics are prominent feature of second language acquisition (SLA), because a great deal of the variations in language outcomes is attributed to various learner characteristics such as age, gender, intelligence, aptitude and so on. However, scholars within the field distinguished various factors which as they believe influence second or foreign language acquisition. These individual learner characteristics play a central role.

Liao as cited in Eddy (2011) distinguished the following cognitive factors of L_2 acquisition as: intelligence, aptitude and language learning strategies. Lujan-Ortega (2000) proposes, age, aptitude/intelligence, motivation, learning/cognitive styles and personality. Skehan (2002) argues that in literature, four main areas are emphasized when considering individual characteristics in second foreign language learning as: Language aptitude, learning styles, motivation and learning strategies. He adds that according to Dewaele and Furnham (1999) personality is of certain importance. Bond (2002) in her research on a successful language learners, is more accurate in stating the factors that may help one's language learning and draws more detailed perspective such as: age, exposure to foreign language in infancy, immersion, intelligence, personality, attitude and motivation, relationship between first and target language, sensory style, learning strategies and other factors (such as mimicry and musical ability).

Language Learning Styles and Learning Strategies

The term learning styles has been used to describe an individual's natural habitual and preferred way of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and (Reid as cited in Abas, 2015). For others, it is referred to as "kinesthetic" learner physical action such as miming and role play. Learner style seem to help learning process and they are referred to as perceptually based learning style. Considerable research has also focused on distortion between different cognitive learning styles. Individuals also have been described as field independent or field dependent. For example, it was widely said that there was strong relationship between field independence and success in social language learning.

Language learning styles are also referred to as cognitive variations in learning a second language (L_2). It is also all about individual's preferred way of processing that is, of perceiving, conceptualizing, organizing and recalling information related to language learning. According to Cornett as cited in Zafar and Meanakshi (2014) language learning styles are the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behaviour. Brown (2000) states that unlike factors of age, aptitude, and motivation, its role in explaining why some L_2 learners are more successful than others have been well established, and it involves a complex (and as yet poorly understand) interaction with specific L_2 social and learning contexts. The following cognitive styles have been identified by Knowles as cited in Zafar and Meenakshi (2014) as:

- Concrete Learning Style;
-         Communicative learning style; and,
-         Authority- oriented learning style and;
-         Concrete learning styles
-     Concrete learning style

Learners with a concrete learning style use active and direct means of taking in and processing information. They are interested in and processing information. They are interested in information that has immediate value. They are curious, spontaneous and willing to take risks. They like variety and constant change of pace. They dislike routine learning and written work, and prefer verbal or visual experiences. They like to be entertaining and like to be physically involved in learning.

-   Analytical Learning Style

Learners with an analytical style are independent, like to solve problems, and enjoy tracking down ideas and developing principles on their own. Such learners prefer a logical systematic presentation of new learning materials with opportunity for learners to follow up on their own. Analytical learners are serious, push themselves hard, and are vulnerable to failure.

-         **Communicative Learning Style**

Learners with a communicative learning style prefer a social approach to learning. They need personal feedback and interaction and learn well from discussion and group activities. They thrive in a democratically run class.

-   Authority-Oriented Learning Style

Learners with an authority-oriented learning style are said to be responsible and dependable, they like and need structure and sequential progression. They relate well to a traditional classroom. They prefer the teacher as an authority figure. They like to have instructions and to know exactly what they are doing; they are not comfortable with consensus-building discussion

Witkin as cited in Zafar and Meenakshi (2014) states that cognitive learning style is vital to language acquisition. The learning style is of two types: field independent (left brain dominance) and field dependent styles (right brain dominance). A learner with a field independent style is usually an independent and confident being who see parts and details from a whole. The rationale, logical and mathematical side of the student's mind is more active during the process of learning. Such a learner thrives in a class full of activities and exercises.

In the process of learning, be it a foreign or any other subject matter, certain ways must be used, so that the result the learner wishes for is achieved. Learning style is a "general approach to language learning" (Oxford, 1994). The ways the learner applies while studying are called learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990) learning strategies are "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques students use often consciously to improve their progress in apprehending internalizing and using the L_2". Researchers have identified active strategies commonly employed by learners which help them learn more effectively (Naimen and Wesche as cited in Eddy, 2014). These include for example, repeating silently what is heard, thinking through one's own answer and comparing (it) to the one given, memorizing, dialogues, identifying oneself with one's foreign language

identity, seeking opportunities for communication in the target language and finding ways to widen the scope for social interactions. With regard to preferred learning activities, a learning style of an individual can be identified. According to Strakova (2004), learning styles are general approaches we use to learn a new language. These are the same styles we use in learning other subjects. The most general new points differentiates between analytical (field independent) students who concentrate grammatical details but feel less safe in communicative activities. They tend to learn the rules and principles of a language and do not like improvisation or taking guesses if an unfamiliar language situation occurs. Another one is called global (field dependent) students who are sociable, like interaction and communication. They are not compensation strategies to avoid blocks in communication.

However, based on sensory preference of an individual learner, styles can be identified as:
- **Visual:** Students who prefer to use their sight to receive information.
- **Auditory:** Students who prefer to use their learning to receive information.
- **Kinaesthetic:** Students who need active movement and involvement to learn;
- **Tactile:** Students who like handling objects and use their touch to receive information.

Hence, another classification divides students who innovative analytical, common sense and dynamic learners (adapted from Svoboda and Hrenhovik, 2006; Strakova, 2004). While acquiring a foreign language learning strategies can be of significant importance. According to Oxford (1990) language strategies include:
- allowing learners to become more self-directed;
- expand the role of language teachers;
- are problem-oriented;
- improve many aspects, not just the cognitive;
- can be taught;
- are flexible
- are influenced by a variety of factors

Specifically according to Oxford (1990), they are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competences in individuals.

Method
Research Question
The study seeks to discover responses to the research question:
- What are the most and least used language learning strategies of students learning foreign/second language (L_2) in the senior public secondary schools in Aba Municipals of Abia State.

Design of the study
Research setting:
This research was carried out at senior secondary schools in Aba Municipality of Abia State, Nigeria.

Research Participants
124 participants were drawn from four thousand two hundred and seventy two (4272) students from five different secondary schools out of ten senior secondary schools in Aba Municipals. They were all non-native speaker of English Language with different English language proficiency levels.

Instrumentation
A self-designed questionnaire was employed in the study which included two major parts. The first part was about demographic data of the research participants, their age, genders, name of school and present class. The second part is the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) version of speakers of other languages learning English. Oxford (1990), was used for gathering a foundation of language learning strategies that students apply in their learning process. Here the independent variables include age, gender and the self-rated English proficiency. The dependent variables are the mean scores of the entire strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) items and the mean scores of the different language learning categories: memory, meta cognitive, cognitive, compensation, affective and social.

Data Analysis Procedures
Data was analyzed through descriptive statistics, by using frequencies and mean statistics to respond to the research question. To conduct the demographic data analyses, individual students, and self-rated language proficiency and to examine the overall strategy use in strategy category, the most and least used strategy items, Oxford's assessment criteria were used to examine the mean scores of frequency of strategy use. Mean scores ranged from 1.0 – 2.4 were considered as low use of strategy, while the range of 2.5 and above were rated medium use and the range of 3 and above were rated as high use.

Results
Research Question
What are the most and least used language learning strategies amongst L_2 students in the secondary schools in Aba Municipals of Abia State.
Table 1:   Frequency of Overall categories of strategy use

S/N	Language Learning Strategies	SA	A	D	SD	Total	$\overline{x}$	Use
1	Memory strategies	216	150	24	8	398	320	high
2	Cognitive strategies	160	174	28	12	374	3.01	high
3	Compensation strategies	72	84	142	7	304	2.45	Low
4	Metacognitive strategies	180	162	38	6	386	3.11	High
5	Affective strategies	160	150	40	14	364	2.93	medium
6	Social strategies	256	90	40	10	396	3.19	high

As indicated in table 1, the frequency of the overall strategy use ranged from high to medium and low. The research participants in general used the six language strategies to their learning process at high level. With regard to the frequency of use each of the six strategies, the high used language strategies included memory (M = 3.20; social (M = 3.19); meta-cognitive strategies (M = 3.11; Cognitive (M = 3.01) and affective strategies (M = 2.93) was at high level respectively while compensation strategies was used at a low level.

High range strategy use was found in four of the six strategies in the study. from the scale of strategy use from the most use to the least used, the results showed that the most frequently used strategy categories were: if I do not understand anything in English in the classroom, I ask another person to say it again (M = 3.20); followed by: I pay attention when someone is speaking English Language (M = 3.19); and to understand something unfamiliar in English words, I make guesses (3.11) respectively. The least frequent use of strategy use categories were: write notes, messages, reports or letters in English Language (M = 2.93); and (M = 2.45).

Table 2:   The most frequently used strategies in the classroom

s/n	Rank	Items	Strategy	$\overline{x}$	use
7	1st	Memory	I write notes, reports and messages in English language	3.20	High
8	2nd	Cognitive	I make summaries of information that I read in English Language	3.01	High
9	3rd	Compensation	I plan my schedule so that I will have enough time to study English Language everyday	3.11	High
10	4th	Metacognitive	i ask for help when i cannot help understand spoken words from fellow students who speak English Language more than me	3.19	High
11	5th	Affective	I give myself a reward when I do well in both oral and written English in the class	2.98	Medium
12	6th	Social	When I can't think of a word during conversation, I use gestures	2.93	Medium

As indicated in table 2, the most frequently preferred strategy included strategies 1st to the 6th ranked respectively. Four of which were in high use respectively and the most being the memory strategies (I write notes, letters, reports and messages in English Language and so on).

Table 3:   Lest frequently used strategies in the classroom

s/n	Rank	Items	Strategy	$\overline{x}$
13	1	Cognitive	I write notes, reports and messages in English language	2.29
14	2	Memory	I use flashcards to remember new English words	2.35
15	3	Memory	I Review English lessons often	2.37
16	4	Affective	i give myself a reward when I do well in English Language	2.45
17	5	Social	I ask for help from well spoken English students	2.35
18	6	Metacognitive	I plan my schedule so as to have enough time to study English Language	2.29
19	7	Cognitive	I try to find patterns in English Language	2.37
20	8	Cognitive	I read for pleasure in English Language	2.29

As indicated in table 3, the least frequently used strategies items 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, respectively, all of which were used in a low range. The top least strategy item was in the affective strategy category. I give myself a reward when I do well in English Language.

Discussion

Individual students reported high, medium and low use of the six language strategy categories. The mean score (M = 3.19), suggested that the participants used learning strategies at a moderate level. The mean score (M = 3.19) suggested that the participants used learning strategies at a high level. The present study findings corroborated with previous research works conducted with English as a second language (ESL) which demonstrate that students' used language learning strategy at a high frequency (Green and Oxford, 1995; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995) and that of Kittawee, Sorangthaporn, Engchuan and Thanathito, 2011; and Pringorom (2008.) Aithough according to Mongkol (2016), in his study of EFL learning contexts showed that in most of the similar research, participants could not define language learning strategy or even know that they applied LLS to their learning process, but seemed to understand the functions of LLS.

In this study also, cognitive strategy category was used more by participants followed by memory and metacognitive strategy categories respectively. Even though cognitive strategies were found to be the least used strategies, the mean score indicated relative value of language learning strategy use level. However this result did not indicate that the participants do not know about cognitive strategies. Lee (2006) observed that the more students know about language learning strategies, the more they are likely to apply the strategies when learning L_2. Rao as cited in Mangkol (2015) noted in his study that students seem to use different learning strategies from those of ESL learners and that ESL learners are more likely to learn English for survival and to maximize their accessibility to authentic learning materials. However, in this present study, participants learn English language without being exposed to English speaking environments and without any opportunity of communicating with the nature English speakers except their English teachers who are also non-English natives. The result therefore showed that the students use learning strategies at different levels and with different categories in their classroom process.

The present study demonstrated that the mean scores of memory strategies categories (M =3.20), and social strategies (M = 3.19) are almost equal. Both learning strategies in the present study were used at a high level. Mangkol in his study noted that Language learners found that L_2 learners are less likely to express their opinions in front of the public; they are quite shy and keep silent in English classes. According to him, most of his L_2 learners were afraid of communicating in English. They avoided losing face to avoid making errors while speaking English language in the class process. But this is quite contradictory to the present study. The participants indicated that they usually motivate themselves to speak English language. Some of the participants indicated that in speaking English with errors is far better than not speaking at all in the classroom and that avoiding the use of English language brings negative results towards the language learning and making the learning process unsuccessful. This shows that teachers has a lot of jobs to do while teaching L_2 in the classroom because of the student individual characteristics and encourage them to

speak out the new language. This shows that the more the students are helped to manage their negative feelings about using the new language the more success they will achieve their goals of learning the new language.

In this study also, meta-cognitive strategies ranked 3rd in the learning process. The strategy really helped the students to concentrate on learning and planning their learning for more benefits. About the least used strategy in table 3, the result showed that first two favored strategies were in cognitive and memory strategy categories. The cognitive strategy which were found to be the least frequently used were: I write notes, messages, letters in English language (M = 2.29) as the memory strategy items least preferred. However, all the least strategy items were rated in a low level range. The current study corroborated with some of the previous research study. In his study Yang (2010) with Korean English foreign learners (EFL),noted that writing notes, messages, letters and reports matters in English, make summaries of information that I hear or read in English language, and use flashcard to remember new English words were the least frequently used strategies. Actually this shows that many students may apply the use of flashcards for retaining their new learnt technology in their classroom learning process.

Conclusion

However, the study has limitations, one of which was that the participants were drawn from non-native learning environment from public senior secondary schools in Aba metropolis of Abia State. So the generation from the results are so limited to a similar population inclusive of other private and other public secondary school students in the state. The second limitation is the research instrument which was a self-structured questionnaire designed by the researcher including the strategy inventory for language learning questionnaire (SILL). The findings however may not provide profound learning strategy according to Lee and Oyelson (2006) who claimed that the self-reported data can "effect general interference, a desire to give the right answer or to please the teacher and so on". The study also relied primarily on the responses from the participants which may not manifest actual language learning behaviours.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1.   That teachers of English language at the secondary level should consider the preferred language strategies while engaging the students' in the classroom contexts activities by providing them activities that would correspond to their favoured learning strategies so as to realize the best from both the teachers and the students.

2.   Curriculum planners/developers should incorporate the findings in their strategic plan and implement these language learning strategies preferred by students in the current study like: cognitive, memory, meta-cognitive and affective and social strategies in their plans

3.   Second language (L_2) students should be provided with authentic learning environments such as language laboratory to enable them face new language objectively.

References

Abas, S. (2015). Individual Characteristics in second language acquisition. Faculty of Applied Linguistics Program. State University of Yogykarta. *Media neliti.com>publications*.

Bond, K. (2002). Profile of a successful language learner. *http://www. Tulus.net/linguisticissues/successful.html*

Brown, H.D (2000). Principles of language learning and teaching, eaglewood Cliffs, N.J Prentice Hall, Inc.

Cohen, A. (2011). Strategies in learning and using a second language (2ⁿᵈ ed.) Longman data: *text/html/: charset =utf -8,6 --- Wikipedia language learning strategies.*

Dornyel, Z., Macintyre, D.P. and Henry, A (eds) (2015). Motivational dynamics in language learning. Bristol: Multilingual matters

Danvaelle, J. and Furnham, A (1999). Extraversion: the unloved variable .in applied linguistic research. Language learning 49.3

Eddy, E. (2011). On the involvement of cognitive process in the acquisition of English Grammar by Slovak Learners. Pros *http://pulib.sk*

Heath, R (2015). Researching on language strategies in P.B. Phakiti, ACK (eds). Research methods in applied linguistics Bloomsbury.

Kittawee, P., Soranasthaporn, S. Engchuan, K and Thanathiti, T (2011). The relationship between the use of language learning strategies, the levels of language anxiety and English ability of MBA students (online) retrieved from *http://www.academia.edu/8621531htm*

Lee, H. (2000). A relationship between English language learning strategies and achievement. *The Journal of English language teaching, 12, 247, - 270*

Lee, H. and Oxelson, E (2006). Its not my job, K-12 teacher attitudes towards students heritage language maintenance. *Bilingual research Journal, 30 (2), 453-477.*

Lugan-Ortega, V. (2000). Individual differences, strategic performance and achievement in second language learners of Spanish. *Studies Linguistua. 54. (2). 280-288*

Mercer, B (2015). Learners Agency and engagement. Retrieving you can wanting to and knowing how to Humanizing language teaching, 17(4), accessed 15 August, 2016.

Mongkol, C. (2016). Individual learner differences and language learning strategies. Contemporary educational research-journal, 7 (2); 57-72. Retrieved from *https://www.academia.edu/34991744/ individual learning differe--- PDF*

Oxford, R.L. (1990). Language Learning strategies: what every teacher should know. New York: Newsburg House Publishers

Oxford, R.L (2002). Language learning styles and strategies. An overview, Oxford: GALA

Oxford, H.R and Burry, Stock, J.A (1995). Assessing the use of language learning strategies worldwide with the ESL/EFL version of the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) system, 2111-23.

Oxford, H.L. (2012). Individual differences in Routledge Encyclopedia of Second Language acquisition, edited by P. Robsin, 302-8, 2ⁿᵈ ed. London:

Pringorom, P. (2008). The study of language learning strategies used by first and second year students at Bangkok University, (online) retrieved from *http://www.briach/knowledge* centre/paper july doc 2009/pdf/preawpan pdf

Shatz, I (2014). Parameters for assessing the effectiveness of language learning strategies (PDF) Journal of language and cultural education 2(3): 96-103. Retrieved from html: charset = utf – 8;6--- Wikipedia language learning strategies

Strakova, Z (2004). Introduction to teaching English as a foreign language Presov

Svoboda, A, and Hrenhovik, T (2006). An ABC of theoretical and applied linguistics Opara: Silesian University

Skehan, P. (2002). Individual differences in second and foreign language learning. *http://www.lang.itsn.ac.uk/resources/good* practice. aspx? resourceid =91

Ushioda, E (2009). A person context relational view of emergent motivation, self and identity. In E. Ushiodo, 215-28. Bristol: Multi-lingual maters.

Vygotsky, S. (1978). Mind in society. The development of higher psychological process: London: Harvard University Press

Yang, N (2010). The relationship between EFL learner beliefs and learning strategies use system. 27 (3), 575-535

Zafar, S and Meeanakshi, K (2014). Individual learner differences and second language acquisition: A review school of social sciences and languages. VTT University. Vellore- 632014, TN. India. Email: Kmeerakshi e vit.ac.in