The Teacher: another Variable in the Use of Foreign Language Learning Strategies?

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Abstract

The Bologna process aims to create the European Higher Education Framework (EHEF) by making academic degree and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe. The EHEF has different implications for university students, representing a change in emphasis from 'teaching' to 'learning', from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach.

In the last thirty years, researchers have discussed the role of teachers and students in the language learning-teaching process. Until then, the acquisition of a foreign language was focused on the teacher's methodology. In the 80s and 90s, a series of student-centred approaches emerged, with the aim of making students more autonomous and independent in their learning.

Language learning strategies are part of the tools used to improve language learning. There are different definitions and taxonomies of language learning strategies (Chamot (2001), Cohen (1998), Oxford (1990), O'Malley (1990) and Wenden & Rubin (1987) and there have been extensive descriptive studies on the different variables affecting the use of learning strategies including gender, previous linguistic knowledge, motivation, learning styles and/or second language versus foreign language acquisition.

This paper aims to explore the instructor's conscious or unconscious influence students' use of learning strategies. To undertake this study, a group of teachers was asked to assess the 50 strategies presented in an adapted version of the Strategies Inventory Language Learning (Oxford 1990) according to their suitability and practicality for their students. The participants were lecturers from the French and English Department at Cádiz University. The languages included in the study were English, French and German for specific and general purposes.

Key words: teachers influence, language learning strategies, languages for specific purposes.

Introduction

The European Higher Education Framework (EHEF) represents a change in emphasis from 'teaching' to 'learning', from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred one. Student-centred learning produces a focus on the teaching -learning - assessment relationships and the way learning is designed, delivered and assessed. This new challenge means adapting to changes such as encouraging students to be more autonomous when learning a language.

There have been many authors who have written about the roles and duties of the teachers (Alcaraz y Moody, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Holec, 1985, Harmer, 2001; Martínez, 2007, among others). All of them agree in the roles the language teacher needs to adopt: controller, advisor, organizer, participant, "entertainer", etc. As Holec (1981:25) states:

> ...the teacher will find his role becomes more varied rather than curtailed, strengthened rather than weakened ... and much stronger demands will be made of his creativity than on his highly developed knowledge of his teaching techniques. The traditional teacher who might be regarded as replaceable will give way to a teacher whose role in the process of developing the learner will be irreplaceable.

On the other hand, students must be responsible and make decisions regarding their own learning in order to decide what knowledge and abilities they will need (Sinclair et al, 2000). One of the tools to get that autonomy is the use of language learning strategies, defined as "any set of operations, steps plans routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage retrieval and use of information" (Wenden & Rubin: 1987, 19). Oxford (1989) defined them as "Language learning strategies are behaviours or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable".

Oxford (1990) divides language learning strategies into two mayor types: direct and indirect. Within the first group she distinguishes memory strategies, used for the storage of information; cognitive

strategies, the mental strategies learners use to make sense of their learning; and compensation strategies, which help learners to overcome knowledge gaps to continue the communication. Within the indirect strategies, she mentions metacognitive strategies, which help learners to regulate their learning; affective strategies, concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, and social strategies which lead to increased interaction with the target language.

Many descriptive studies have been carried out regarding the variables which affect the use of strategies, among them gender, language level, motivation, foreign language versus second language acquisition. This paper aims to highlight s potential new variable in the list: the teacher, as the teacher's influence on their students, either consciously or unconsciously, is unquestionable.

Objectives and methodology

The objective of this paper is to evaluate language lecturers' opinion on the usefulness of the different strategies for learning a language. The questionnaires used to collect data had two sections:

■ Section A: dealing with personal details, such as gender, language taught, number of years teaching, number of students in class and specific or general language taught.

■ Section B: it was a Spanish version of Oxford's *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) (Oxford, 1990: 293-300).The inventory includes 50 statements of strategies which must be scored from 1 to 5 depending on the participants' level of agreement.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

For that general purpose we need to:

• Analyse the different opinions that the teachers show regarding the importance given to each strategy.

• Determine which strategies are considered the most and the least relevant.

• Check if factors such as the number of years teaching or the number of students per class affect the results in the assessment of the strategies.

The participants in the study were 27 lecturers of foreign language teaching English (20), French (4) and German (3) from the English and French Department at Cádiz University. The teachers were asked to assess the strategies they thought students should use. In other words, the strategies that, as a teacher he/she would recommend to their students as useful, practical or suitable for the learning of a foreign language. They were not asked to assess if the students used the strategies or if they, as teachers practised the strategies with the students. They simply had to grade the strategies considering how useful they were for the students.

Inventory assessment

Memory strategies defined by Oxford as "….such as grouping or using imagery, have a highly specific function: helping students store and retrieve new information". (Oxford, 1990:37) scored 3.58 out of 5. The highest ranked strategy in this group is strategy 1: "I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English". It scored 4.7 out of 5. Most teachers (74%) stated that this is essential to increase knowledge. On the other hand, the lowest scored strategy was strategy 5. **"I use rhymes to remember new English words"** which obtained a mark of 2.3 out of 5. The reason could be that this is not a frequently used type of activity in the teaching methodology in Spain, and neither the teacher nor the students value its use. It is also worth mentioning strategy 7 "I physically act out new English words" because of the variety of opinions teachers had about it, it obtained very different results, as can be observed in figure 1, being value 1, the least useful and value 5 the most.
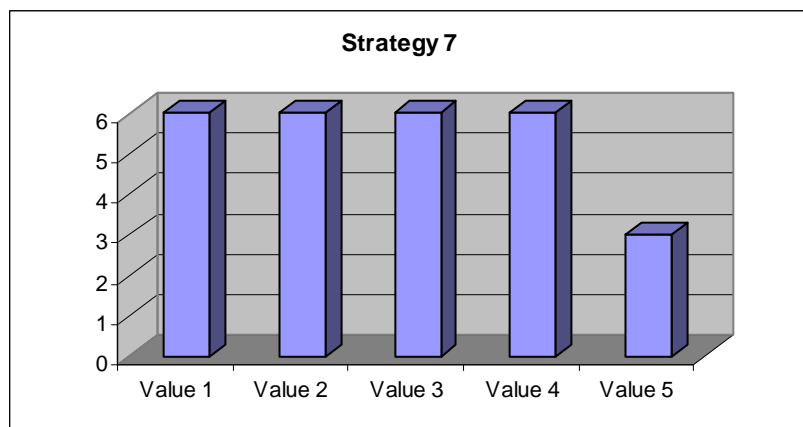
Figure 1: Strategy 7: "I physically act out new English words"

It can be observed that there is no consensus on the importance of using that strategy. The teachers who regarded the strategy with interest and the ones who did not agree share no variable such as number of years teaching, number of students or language taught.

Cognitive strategies "… such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means" (Oxford, 1990: 37) scored 4.13 out of 5. Strategy 15 "I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English" is considered of great importance by the teachers (4.7); all of them think that this activity should be used always or often.

We also need to mention strategy 16 "I read for pleasure in English". Almost all the lecturers (91%)/ think it is an important strategy, as it scored 4.6 out of 5; they agree it is necessary to read for pleasure in the foreign language always or at least frequently. This information contrasts with the results reported in a study which examined the use of language learning strategies by students of English for specific purposes of three different University degrees (Lario, et al.: 2009, 24). 64.4% of students reported to use the activity "Never or almost never true or usually not true of me". This result was no surprise as reading is not regarded as a traditional pastime by Spaniards.

Strategy 22 "I try not to translate word-for-word." showed a similar outcome. Most teachers thought it should be avoided, nevertheless someone thought in some way translation could be a methodologically appropriate strategy, suitable for lower level students.

However, strategy 21 "I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand" had mixed results as can be observed in the figure below, it does not seem to be a useful strategy to all the teachers.
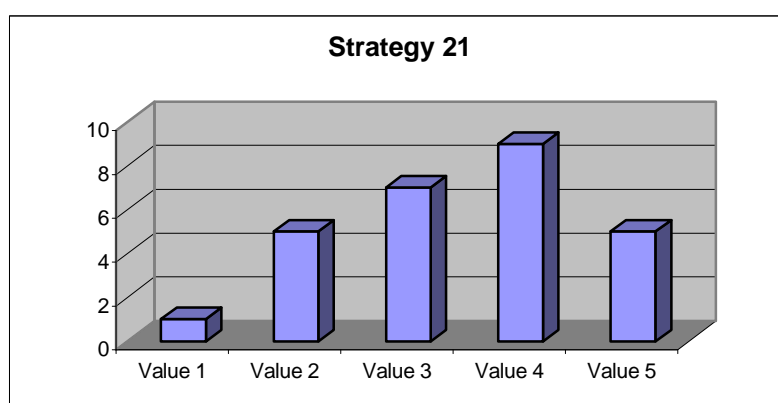

Figure 2: Strategy 21"I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand"

Compensation strategies "…like guessing or using synonyms, allow learners to use language despite their often large gaps in knowledge" (Oxford, 1990: 37) scored 3.64 out of 5, being the second lowest valued group of strategies. Different groups of students doing different University degrees, on the other hand, reported this type of strategies as the first and the third most used in order to compensate for their lack of linguistic knowledge (Lario et al: 2009, 24; Bocanegra: 2004: 561). The highest scored strategy by

the teachers among compensation strategies was strategy 29: "If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing". 91% of the teachers, thought the strategy should be considered usually true or always or almost always true.

Metacognitive strategies: "… allow learners to control their own cognition–that is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating" (Oxford, 1990: 37). They were the second highest scored strategies by the foreign language teachers with 4.21 over 5. The highest ranked strategy was strategy 32 "I pay attention when someone is speaking English". These results match the ones reported by the students of social and health sciences in a previous study mentioned above (Lario et al: 2009, 24). The vast majority of lecturers participating in the study showed the relevance of using every opportunity to improve knowledge of the language.
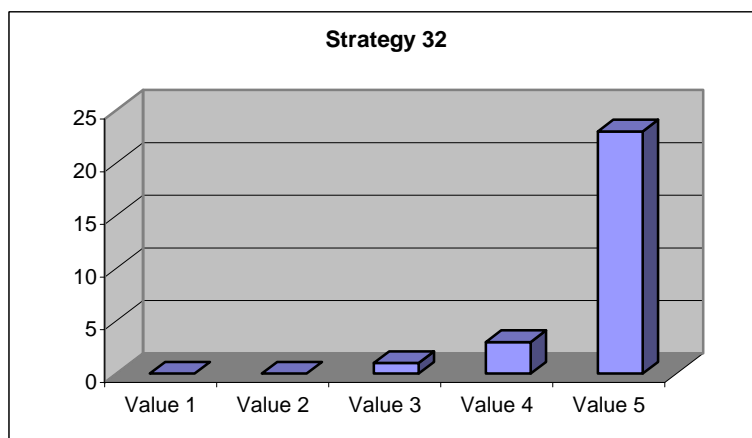
Strategy 32

Figure 3: Strategy 32 "I pay attention when someone is speaking English"

Teachers and students alike agree on the assessment of affective strategies, which "help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes" (Oxford, 1990: 37) as the lowest scored strategies. Strategy 39 "I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English" was the highest ranked strategy among them. Teachers are aware of how nervous students feel whenever they have to use the English language.
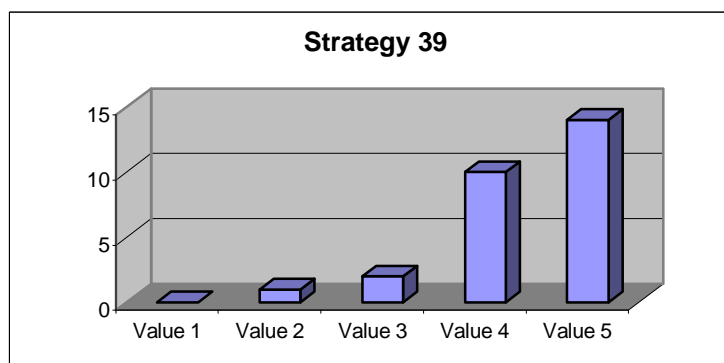
Strategy 39

Figure 4: Strategy 39 "I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English"

On the other hand, strategy 43 "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary", was the lowest scored strategy, not only within the affective strategies but of all 50 strategies in the questionnaire. It is not a popular activity promoted by teachers or used by students.

For the teachers, social strategies which according to Oxford (1990) "help to learn through interaction" are the most valued strategies (4.33). Teachers think that these strategies should be used very frequently in the foreign language learning situation. We need to mention strategy 49 "I ask questions in English". The vast majority would like their students to use this strategy as an active part of their learning.
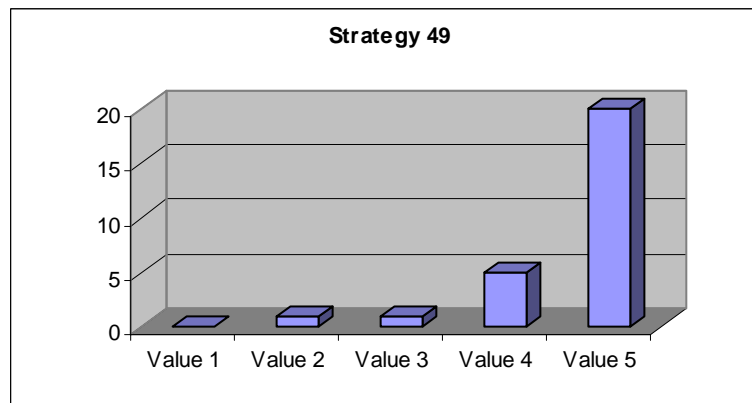
Figure 5: Strategy 49 "I ask questions in English".

The highest scored strategies were the social strategies, 4.33 out of 5; that means that these strategies are followed by metacognitive strategies; cognitive strategies; compensation strategies; memory strategies and affective strategies as it can be seen on the table.

Strategies	Value	Ranking
Memory	3.58	5
Cognitive	4.13	3
Compensation	3.64	4
Metacognitive	4.21	2
Affective	3.15	6
Social	4.33	1

Table 1: Strategies' value

Strategy 32 was the highest scored (4.8), "I pay attention when someone is speaking English". This outcome matches the results reported in the study which examined the relationship between language learning strategies and students of English for specific purposes of three different University degrees (Lario, et al.: 2009, 24) The 70% of the students reported to use the strategy always or often, specially the group of students of Tourism; 94% use this activity always or often.

Concluding remarks

According to the lecturers participating in this study social strategies are the most important when learning a foreign language. These enable students to learn through the interaction with others, socializing is considered by teachers an essential part of the language learning process. Language is communication and through social strategies, learners can increase their communication skills in a foreign language. In contrast, students tend to use compensation strategies. One of the reasons for this difference might be due to the fact that students do not regard the foreign language learning as a process which will enable them to communicate with speakers of other languages, but mainly as another course they need to pass.

The second highest ranked group of strategies are the metacognitive strategies, which help learners control their own learning process by means of organization, planning and assessment tasks.

In third position were the cognitive strategies, which help the learner understand and process new information through reasoning, analysis and patterns.

Compensation strategies, which help students use the language despite a lack of linguistic knowledge, are not considered very important by teachers. This information contrasts with the students' report of strategy use; as mentioned previously.

Memory strategies are the second lowest scored; teachers do not seem to regard them as very relevant for foreign language learning. The students agree with teachers, providing them with the same score.

The lowest scored strategies, by both teachers and students, are affective strategies, which enable students to control their emotions, feelings and motivation related to language learning.

The most valued individual strategy was strategy 32 ("I pay attention when someone is speaking English"), followed by strategies 15 ("I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English), 16 ("I read for pleasure in English"), 22 ("I try not to translate word-for-word"), 29 ("If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing"), 39 ("I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English")., and 49 ("I ask questions in English"). In spite of

belonging to different groups of strategies, all of them have something in common; they are related to communicative competence. On the other hand, the least valued individual strategies were strategy 5 (**"I use rhymes to remember new English words"**) and 26 ("I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English") both related to the acquisition of vocabulary; all the strategies that had mixed results were also related to the acquisition of vocabulary and belonged to different groups of strategies like the most valued ones.

These results show that all teachers seem to agree on the importance given to communicative competence, the ability to communicate in a foreign language, but their opinions differ on the acquisition of vocabulary.

Factors such as the number of years teaching, the number of students per class and the language taught, whether specific or general, were also examined, but did not show any effect on the assessment of the strategies. Teachers, regardless of these factors seem to share a common objective; to help students find the most suitable way to learn the target language.

It is unquestionable that teachers need to help language learners to become autonomous and accept responsibility for their own learning and introducing them to the use of strategies could be on of the most important tools.

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