

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF  
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NIGERIA: A  
PRELIMINARY SURVEY**

**Noor Zainab bint Abdul Razak\***

**Mallam Adamu Babikkoi\***

**Abstract**

This preliminary survey investigated the language learning strategies employed by ESL secondary school students in Nigeria. The respondents were 40 senior secondary school students (SS2) who have been studying English for a minimum of 10 years. In Nigeria English language is the sole language of instruction across the levels of education right from primary four, making English language proficiency a prerequisite to academic excellence. Using the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) Oxford (1990), this study identified the language learning strategy use of Nigerian ESL learners, frequency of usage and differences of usage based on gender. The study found out that, all the six categories of language learning strategies were used at high level of frequency. The most employed strategy was the affective and the least employed was compensation strategies, female students used less strategies compared to their male counterparts.

**Keywords:** Second Language pedagogy, learning strategies, Nigeria, secondary schools

\* Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, UTM Skudai, 81310 Johor, Malaysia (2,397 words)

## Introduction

Studies involving language learners often reveal that the most successful learners employ learning strategies that are quite suitable not only to the task, but also to the learning material, self-objectives, needs, motivation and stage of learning (Oxford, 1990). This clearly indicates that, good language learners possess unique abilities to succeed using chosen learning strategies. Since employing learning strategies have been found to influence positively the learning of ESL (Oxford, 1990), this pilot study was carried as a preliminary step in investigating the language learning strategies employed by secondary school students in Nigeria while learning English language. As rightly observed by Oxford (1990), employing learning strategies depends on some variables such as, degree of awareness, gender, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectation, age, ethnicity, learning style, motivation and purpose for learning the target language.

It is essential to stress that learners' attitude to learning is quite central in determining success in attainment of learning task as such study habits functions as both means and ends of learning. According to Gardner (1985) and Nwogu (2002), learning a second language is a socio-psychological activity involving habit formation which is achieved through very active participation, adopting various learning strategies to effectively achieve a favourable performance of the learner in the production of the target language. There has been a decline in English language proficiency level of Nigerian secondary school students which has continuously affected their performance in their terminal examinations and it can be attributed to the way and manner English language is taught and learnt in Nigeria (Falayajo 1997; Oluwoye 2008).

## Learning Strategies and its Potentials to ESL/EFL Learners

Learning strategies as conscious ideas and actions which ESL learners employ to be able to acquire a learning goal is of interest to many in the field of social and cognitive psychology, linguistics and language pedagogy. Learning strategies exposes the metacognitive plan of learner regarding their own thinking and learning approaches, a great knowledge of exactly what a task entails, and the opportunity to use the strategies that best meet both task demands as well as their own learning talents. According to Tarone (1983) language learning strategies is a deliberate attempt by a learner to develop his/her linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language. Dansereau (1985) defines it as the deliberate behaviours and thoughts used by

learners in order to assist them in acquisition, retrieving and use information. Similarly, Weinstein and Mayer (1986) see language learning strategies as such behaviours and thoughts which a learner engages in during learning which are intended to influence the learner's encoding process. Chamot (1993) observed that, language learning strategies refer to those techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate their learning process and recalling of both linguistic and content aspects of information. It means therefore, that learning strategies can facilitate the internalization, retrieval, and or use of the target language.

According to Oxford (2003), learning strategies are employed differently and has the potentials of influencing the individual learner's proficiency, confidence and lowers his anxiety. Therefore, investigating the learners' strategy use in the context of their varying characteristics and what effect each variable can exert in influencing the choice of language learning strategies and frequency is no doubt vital because it will significantly contribute to learners' planning and improvement strategies as it affects English language pedagogy. Learning strategies play a very important role in SLA and was of interest to many and has continued to be outlined and addressed by many studies (Oxford 1990; Cohen 2011; Cook 2001; Green & Oxford 1995). These studies are of the opinion that learning strategies can promote learners' autonomy in ESL/EFL learning, in addition to helping the learner to achieve proficiency. Learning strategies, therefore, not just help students become efficient in mastering and taking advantage of language, additionally it increases learners' self-directed learning.

### **Issues in English Language Learning and Usage in Nigeria**

English language is the medium of instruction across almost all levels of education in Nigeria. This entails that apart from been a subject of study it is been used to teach almost all school subjects. In addition to this, English in Nigeria serves as the only official language therefore it is serving the dual purposes of integrative and instrumental needs. The implication is that poor English proficiency correlates with poor performances in the other subjects (Mohammed, 1995). In fact, the mass failure in West African Senior School Certificate of Education has been attributed by many as the adverse effect of poor English command (Falayajo 1997).

According to Bamisaye (2004), in the context of Nigeria, the success or failure of a secondary school student largely depends on his/her ability to manipulate the English language

through competent writing and speaking. In fact, the Nigerian child acquires the L1 often at home but as soon as he/she joins the school begins to learn English language. However, Bamisaye (2004) concludes that there is always the problem of smooth and systematic transition from the home language and the language at the school.

Ariyo (2010) investigated the Language Learner Strategies adopted by Nigerian Students due to the incessant poor outcome of SSCE results almost every year. He found out that Nigerian secondary school students are so poor in both their oral and written English language and suggested that they obviously need to function adequately well in English to academically succeed since it is the medium of instruction across the Nigerian schools. Similarly, Oluwoye (2008) highlighted that SSCE failure has multi-faceted consequences one of which is low morale in the students. Consequently, poor English language proficiency may be seen as a sure impediment to achieving the ideals of Nigeria's much targeted Vision 20-20-20. A much talked about vision which targets that Nigeria hopes to be among the 20 leading economies of the world by the year 2020.

#### **The study objectives:**

- i) Identify the LLS employed by secondary schools students in Nigeria in learning English language.
- ii) Find out the most frequent employed LLS by the secondary school students in Nigeria in learning English language.
- iii) Examine the relationship between gender of the secondary school students in Nigeria and the LLS they employ.

#### **Procedure of Data Collection**

The respondents for the pilot study were 20 males and 20 females' senior secondary students from Adamawa state, Nigeria. In this preliminary study, the use of all the six categories of learning strategies as proposed by Oxford (1990) was investigated: Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social.

#### **Findings of the Study**

The first objective of this preliminary study was to identify the LLS employed by secondary schools students in Nigeria in learning English language. The second was to find out the most frequent employed LLS by the secondary school students in Nigeria in learning English language. The third objective was to find out the difference in employing learning strategies

between male and female respondents. The main focus here is to give a simple descriptive statistics showing the overall LLS employed by the respondents in the pilot study. General findings reveal that, respondents employed all the six categories of learning strategies while learning English language and at different frequencies. The study showed that the most frequently employed strategy was the affective and the least frequently used strategy was compensation. Similarly, when correlation between males and females strategy use was run the results indicated that, male learners exhibited more strategy use than females, (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Mean distribution, standard deviation and ranking LLS**

Domain	Number of respondents	Mean	Frequency Level	Standard Deviation	Ranking
Memory	40	2.9694	Medium	0.688325	5th
Cognitive	40	3.5424	High	0.598495	3rd
Compensation	40	2.6875	Medium	0.79344	6th
Metacognitive	40	3.2944	Medium	0.572945	4th
Affective	40	3.8700	High	1.07389	1st
Social	40	3.5708	High	0.810995	2nd

### Interpretation

In a descriptive survey such as this, Oxford (1990) proposed three levels of frequency of usage: High frequency, (which is 3.5-5.0), medium frequency (2.5-3.49) and low frequency (1.0-2.49). The results of average frequency of all the strategies are compared to conclude on the best strategy used by the respondents in the process of learning English language.

A pattern of strategy use was revealed in this study which indicates that the affective, social and cognitive strategies were highly employed by the respondents while learning English language, while memory, compensation and meta-cognitive strategies were used at medium level. Oxford (1990) maintains that, affective strategy essentially facilitates second language learning process through emphasising that the learner controls his/her emotions, attitudes, motivations, values or degree of acceptance or rejection. It however varies from simple attention to learning from selected phenomena to complex statements but internally consistent qualities of character and consciousness. This pattern of strategy use is also indicative that respondents had

less awareness on planning and taking charge of their learning. However, there was an indication of frequent use of affective strategies, perhaps, a case of relying on other more effective learners to academically help in assignments or other classroom work that involves English language learning.

Similarly, the results point to the fact that respondents look for those to communicate with, which if well coordinated is capable of ensuring the skill of effective speaking amongst learners. Social strategy use in ESL/EFL learning is an indication of enthusiasm in attempting to be proficient. The cognitive strategy was also employed by the respondents implying that they use many skills to obtain, store and retrieve information. It was clear from the findings that, the respondents do not use memory and compensation strategies highly, which may serve as an indicator that practicing the target language may be quite minimal among respondents.

### **Gender and Language Learning Strategies of Secondary School Students in Nigeria**

It was observed from the results of this preliminary study that, on the bases of general strategy use female respondents employed less learning strategies than male respondents. However, the study revealed a pattern of variations in strategy use between male and female respondents which shows that the affective strategy was most frequently employed by the female respondents than the males with a mean distribution of 3.7800 and the standard deviation of 1.19279. In using memory and meta-cognitive strategies though, male respondents reported more frequent use than females, while in employing cognitive, compensation and social strategies both male and females appeared to be on the same frequency level, see Table 2.

**Table 2: Gender and Language Learning Strategies of Secondary School Students in Nigeria**

Male				Female		
Strategy	Mean	Frequency	Standard Dev.	Mean	Frequency	Standard Dev.
Memory	3.5014	High	0.73030	2.8944	Medium	0.64635
Cognitive	3.4810	Medium	0.62168	3.3538	Medium	0.57531
Compensation	3.4420	Medium	0.91171	2.6500	Medium	0.67517
.	3.590	High	0.55412	3.1611	Medium	0.59177
M-Cognitive	3.5310	High	0.95499	3.7800	High	1.19279
Affective	3.3890	Medium	0.67104	3.3083	Medium	0.95095
Social						

### Conclusion

This preliminary study has shown that secondary school students in Nigeria employed LLS while learning English language. The study found out that, all the six categories of language learning strategies were used at high level of frequency. While affective strategy was the most frequently employed strategy, compensation strategy was the least employed. It was also found out that female students used less strategies compared to their male counterparts.

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