Some Common Language Learning Strategies Used by French-Speaking Cameroonian Advanced Learners of English: Strengths and Weaknesses

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Abstract

This paper analyses some common language learning strategies used by French-speaking Cameroonian advanced learners of English. The Terminale learners (N=200) and undergraduate students (N=100) are used as the study's subjects. This choice was motivated by the fact that, before these levels, these learners have been using a wealth of language learning strategies in French, English, German Spanish or Arabic. The data is analysed following O'Malley's and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies. Results show that these learners use more cognitive than social and metacognitive learning strategies. This prevents them from efficiently developing their communication skills and evaluating their learning. Consequently, when these subjects leave the secondary school or the university, many of them are unable to hold a discussion in English. Some suggestions are made as to the strategies to develop in order to assist these learners in their English learning process.

Keywords

learner strategies, cognitive, metacognitive, social, learning process, development

1. Introduction

In any learning process, the learner can adopt many strategies. Some are good and can facilitate learning; others are poor and do not help learning. Some are observable and can clearly be named and explained by the learner, but many are used unconsciously. With language, the strategies are at times quite subtle and intricate as most of them occur below the surface and have to be inferred.

In Cameroon, despite laudable objectives of the English syllabus for secondary/high schools, the level of English of the products of the Francophone subsystem of education (in Cameroon, there are two subsystems of education: the Francophone subsystem and the Anglophone subsystem) is quite disappointing (Sokeng, 2010). This poor performance is usually attributed to the inadequate teaching methods, textbooks or lack of enough English teachers. But no study has so far been conducted to see which language learning strategies the learners of the Francophone Cameroon subsystem of education use in their learning process of English. This paper thus analyses some common language learning

strategies used by advanced French-speaking Cameroonian learners of English and assesses their strengths and weaknesses.

The work (1) describes the learners' background in English, (2) reviews some theories of language learning strategies, (3) surveys some common language learning strategies used by the study's subjects in English, (4) critically assesses their strengths and weaknesses, and (5) suggests their further development in the classroom. Following are the research questions that let to this study.

Research question 1: What are the common language learning strategies used by French-Speaking Cameroonian advanced learners of English?

Research question 2: What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of the strategy used?

Research question 3: Which of the strategies used can be developed in the classroom?

2. Some Theories of Language Learning Strategies

Let us begin by what is meant by language learning strategies. Among many definitions attempted by researchers, three seem to be more specific and complete each other. Oxford (1990, p. 8) defines learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations". Cook (1996, p. 103) sees them as "a choice that the learner makes while learning or using the second language that affects learning." To Ellis (1994, p. 712), "learner strategies are the behavior or the actions that learners engage in, in order to learn or to use the L2". In the three definitions, the key words are choice and actions, which means that learners (even the poor ones) do not use the strategies haphazardly. They choose the ones they deem able to better help acquire the new language.

Many studies have also classified various types of learning strategies (Ellis, 1985; O'Malley et al., 1985; Mclaughlin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford et al., 1990). Oxford (1990) established an elaborate taxonomy of direct and indirect strategies that incorporates cognitive, metacognitive and affective factors in a system of interconnected techniques. Her direct strategies are subdivided into *memory strategies*, *cognitive strategies* and *compensation strategies*. Her indirect strategies comprise the *metacognitive strategies*, the *affective* and the *social strategies* (p. 152). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also dwelled on indirect strategies, which they say are used by most L2 students. They explain those learning strategies in the following terms:

(1) Metacognitive strategies: *planning learning*, *monitoring your own speech, self-evaluation, etc*.

(2) Cognitive strategies: *note-taking, resourcing, elaborating, etc.*

(3) Social strategies: *working with fellow students or asking teacher's help*

Although subject to some criticism, mostly by Cook (1993, p. 135) who argues that nothing about these strategies is peculiar to language, and that "all their strategies could be used for studying any school subject," O'Malley's and Chamot's taxonomy, which somewhat replicates Oxford's (1990, p. 152) seems a useful classification for the present study.

Early studies in the field of language learning strategies include Stern's (1975) research on strategies of

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good and poor language learners. He remarks that the poor learner has little or no insight into his own learning and his own difficulties, nor into the nature of the language learning task: he does not develop any definite and effective study habits. "The good learner is likely to use specific techniques of study and memorization, e.g. of revision, note-taking or spacing learning tasks" (p. 311). Vann and Abraham (1990) concentrated on strategies of unsuccessful language learner. They remark that although their unfortunate Arabic-speaking Saudi Arabian students Mona and Shida used a wealth of strategies, they remained unsuccessful learners of English as a Foreign Language because of the inadequacy of the strategies used. McDonough's (1999) state of the art article on learner strategies is perhaps one of the most significant studies in the field. His review goes from theoretical foundations to strategic performance in skill areas, and strategic instruction. He is quite critical when he questions the methods and findings of a number of studies conducted on language learning strategies. He concludes that many questions in the domain remain unanswered. As he remarks, we do not have an adequate theory of strategic behavior to which all the results can be related. "The relationship between strategy use and proficiency is very complicated: issues such as frequency and quality of strategy use do not bear a simple linear relationship to achievement in a second language" (Mcdonough, 1999, p. 13).

Recent studies in the field of language learning strategies include Lan and Oxford (2003), Kurt and Atay (2006), and Yang's (2007) research on the strategies used by the female nursing majors of the Gung Institute of Technology in northern Taiwan. Her findings revealed that her 461 subjects used more compensation strategies, followed by cognitive strategies, metacognitive, affective and memory strategies (pp. 12-13). Lee (2010) surveyed the development of language learning strategies since 1970s. Her study goes from the various definitions and classifications of language learning strategies offered by researchers to variables that affect them. Among researchers who have attempted a definition of the concept, she cites Naiman et al. (1978), Rigney (1978), Rubin (1981), O'Malley et al. (1985), Wenden (1987), and Oxford (1990). Among studies on variables affecting language learning strategies, Lee surveys Oxford and Nyikos (1989), Chamot and Kupper (1989), Vann and Abraham (1990), Ehrman and Oxford (1995).

3. The Learners' Background in English

Some years ago, many Francophone Cameroonians had the opportunity to learn English only when they entered the secondary school. With the introduction of the English paper at the CEP (Certificat d'Etudes Primaires), and the French paper at the First School Leaving Certificate (Order No 66/c/13 of February 16, 2001), English and French have become effective in all the classes of primary school throughout the country. So, before Francophone Cameroonian learners get to the secondary and high school levels, they have been learning English as a foreign language and French as a second language for at least six years.

In the third year of secondary school, the learners have to choose another language besides English and French. The choice is between German, Spanish, or Arabic (generally in northern Cameroon). But the

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language of formal instruction in this subsystem of education is French. So, when a French-speaking Cameroonian learner of English gets to *Terminale* level, he has been learning English for at least twelve years, i.e. six years in primary school and six years in secondary school. When he gets to the third year of the university, a French-speaking Cameroonian has been learning English for at least fifteen years. In Cameroon, after the secondary school, the teaching of English to Francophones continues for three more years at the tertiary level within the framework of the Bilingual Training program (Echu, 1999; Tagne, 2011). Thus, a French-speaking Cameroonian learner of *Terminale* (Note 1) or university level has been experiencing a host of language learning strategies. He is constantly struggling between his mother tongue, French, English, German, Spanish or Arabic. It is the reason which lies behind the choice of these levels for this study.

4. Methodology

The learning strategies studied were obtained through a questionnaire administered to 200 science, arts and technical *Terminale* students of the Government High School Dschang (in the West Region of Cameroon), Government High School Maroua, Government Technical High School Maroua (in the Far North Region of Cameroon), and to 100 Francophone undergraduate student-teachers of the Higher Teacher Training College Maroua (see the appendix). The questionnaire was first piloted in the school year 2011-2012 with a small sample of 20 *Terminale* students and 20 undergraduate students of the same institutions, before being fully administered at a larger scale in the school year 2013-2014.

To ensure data triangulation (Cohen & Manion, 1994), the questionnaire was complemented by classroom observation by the investigator from 2011 to 2013, especially during the supervision of the teaching practice of the student-teachers of the Higher Teacher Training College Maroua. The learners were observed at work in various learning tasks during the four macro skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Oxford and Crookall (1989, p. 45) see classroom observation as a useful means in knowing certain language learning strategies. As they note, meaningful observations of language learning strategies in the classroom are possible for certain kinds of observable strategies such as co-operating with peers, asking questions, and gesturing to convey meaning. Given the subjects' relatively low level in English, the questionnaire was set in English and French to ensure its full understanding. It comprised a number of suggested learning strategies that the learner had to choose (see the Appendix, Q1 to 15). In addition, the subjects had to list other strategies that they used which were not mentioned in the questionnaire (Q16) as well as those that they found more efficient in their learning process (Q17).

Following O'Malley's and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies, the data was analysed in three categories: (1) metacognitive strategies, (2) cognitive strategies, and (3) social strategies.

5. Results

As said in Sections 2 and 4, the classification is done following O'Malley's and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy. In each category, the first set of strategies was suggested in the questionnaire and the second set was provided by the learners. The following tables summarize the various answers given by the subjects.

Table 1. Use of Suggested Metacognitive Strategies

Strategies suggested	Number of learners (N=300)	%
I practice soliloquy.	34	11.33
I learn a new English word every day.	22	7.33
I check every new word I have used.	15	5

Table 2. Metacognitive Strategies Provided by the Learners

Strategies provided by learners	Number of learners (N=300)	%
I sing in English and imitate musicians who sing in English.	27	9
I secretly imitate my English teacher.	32	10.66

The tables above show that the subjects use very few metacognitive language learning strategies, e.g. *"I check every new word I have used"* (5%), *"I learn a new English word everyday"* (7.33%), *"I secretly imitate my English teacher"* (10.66%). These low percentages are the evidence of the fact that these learners do not plan their learning or monitor their own speech. As a matter of fact, many French-speaking Cameroonian learners of English (especially in secondary school) do not make enough efforts in the learning of the subject, claiming that "c'est Dieu qui donne l'anglais" (it is God who grants English). Tables 3 and 4 below summarize their use of cognitive strategies.

Table 3. Use of Suggested Cognitive Strategies

Suggested strategies	Number of learners (N=300)	%
I read my English books and dictionaries.	270	90
I translate from French or L1 into English.	81	27
At home I repeat exercises done in class.	243	81
I listen to the news in English and to English-speaking people.	162	54
I read English grammar books.	216	72

Table 4. Cognitive Strategies Provided by Learners

Strategies provided	Number of learners (N=300)	%
I read newspapers in English.	18	6
I listen to the music in English.	138	46
I watch films in English.	160	53.33
I watch television in English.	152	50.66

Unlike the metacognitive strategies, the subjects use more cognitive learning strategies, e.g. *"I read my English books and dictionaries"* (90%), *"At home I repeat exercises done in class"* (81%), *"I watch films in English"* (53.33%). These high percentages somehow reflect the teaching/learning methods of French as a second language in Cameroon. In the learning process of French as a second language in this setting, learners make use of a lot of memory strategies to recite lengthy French grammar rules and chunks of literary texts. Tables 5 and 6 which follow summarize the subjects' use of social strategies.

Table 5. Use of Suggested Social Strategies

Strategies suggested	Number of learners (N=300)	%
I converse with English-speaking people.	25	8.33
I do some writing in English and my teacher helps me correct it.	54	18
I ask my friend to give me the correct answer.	90	30
I do group work with my friends.	22	7.33

Table 6. Social Strategies Provided by Learners

Strategies provided	Number of learners (N=300)	%
I ask questions to my English teacher.	81	27
I exchange letters with my Anglophone friends.	27	9
I play games in English with my friends.	44	14

Tables 5 and 6 show that, like the metacognitive language learning strategies, the subjects use very few social strategies, e.g. *"I converse with English-speaking people"* (8.33 %), *" I do group work with my friends"* (7.33 %). Indeed, in Cameroon, classroom observations show that very few teachers of English as a Foreign Language give group/pair work in their classes. They generally complained of overcrowded classes and the nature of the desks (traditional fixed desks in rows). During classroom observation, I remarked that many learners did not take the few pair/group work organized by teachers seriously. They preferred to make noise or read/do something else. At university level, some students even preferred to take a break out during this period.

On the whole, the learners under consideration use more cognitive than social and metacognitive strategies. It is interesting to note that no subject said he expects everything from the teacher (strategy 1 in the appendix, henceforth *str.*). This is a clear indication that they are aware of the necessity of language learning strategies. No respondent also chose *str.8 (I converse in English with my classmates)*, and *str. 9 (I debate in English with my classmates)*, which quite well reflects what was observed in the classrooms during group and pair work. Indeed, observation of pair and group work revealed that many learners were introvert. They either refused to speak even when they knew the answer, to share their knowledge with their peers, or to seek the teacher's help. Although the tasks were carried out in English, almost all the discussions among the learners were done in French (especially in writing and reading tasks). In the few listening activities observed (no EAP teacher that I observed gave listening

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activities), many learners were inactive during the while-listening and post-listening exercises. In speaking activities, the teacher's talking time (TTT) was very disproportionate to the learners' time in all the classes observed. At times, the teacher spoke over 80 percent of the time, asking questions that learners did not answer. In general, many learners were disinterested in speaking activities. This is somewhat reflected in the following social strategy provided by them: "*I ask questions to my English teachers*" (20%, see Table 6).

The subjects listed the following strategies as the most efficient ones (Q 17): "*I read my English books and dictionaries" (str.2), "at home I repeat exercises done in class" (str.4), "I read English grammar books" (str.3), "I listen to the news in English and to English-speaking people" (str.6)*. It is important to note that all these strategies are cognitive ones. The reasons for choosing the various strategies include "*to have more vocabulary items" (str.2)*, " *to better understand the exercises" (str.4)*, "*to learn good pronunciation and good construction of sentences" (str.6)*, "*to speak English like the teacher" (Q 16)*, etc.

6. Strengths and Weaknesses of Strategies Used

The discussion is based on strategies listed in Tables 1-6. But it should be noted that in the domain of language learning strategies, students usually fail to list some strategies they use simply because they cannot term them. Naiman et al. (1978, p. 149) report that, during their interviews, several students indicated that they use techniques for learning in the classroom, which were invisible to any observer, such as attempting to answer themselves every question asked by the teacher.

As remarked earlier, French-speaking Cameroonian advanced learners of English use more cognitive (see Table 3 & 4) than social and metacognitive strategies (see Tables 1, 2, 5 & 6). Cognitive strategies being learner and subject-oriented techniques of learning, they are not easy to assess. There is a lot of input, but there is no guarantee as to output, since the learner alone knows to what extent he has acquired the language. Examples such as "*I read my English course books and dictionaries", "at home I repeat exercises done in class", or "I watch films in English"* (Tables 3 & 4) are not easy to verify, unless tested through a variety of exercises. Without the help of O'Malley's and Chamot's (1990) third metacognitive strategy (*evaluating how well one has done*), the learners themselves would not easily check their progress. Cook (1996, p. 108) remarks that metacognitive and cognitive strategies may benefit students with academic learning who want to treat language as a subject, but may not help those who want to use it for normal functions in society. In fact, the vast majority of French-speaking Cameroonian learners of English treat the language as a school subject. They do it just as a compulsory subject of the school curriculum and to pass their examinations, certificates and degrees. Their use of cognitive strategies may also find its justification in the memorization techniques amply use in French. Seen from this angle, the subjects may be quite right to avoid social strategies, e.g. "*I converse with English speaking people*" (08.33%), "*I exchange letters in English with my Anglophone friends*" (09%). Since in Cameroon the Francophones do not need English in their daily interactions to survive, this

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behavior may well be justified. However, social strategies that very few subjects claimed to use (see Tables 5 & 6) may be very useful in such context where exposure to the target language is limited. Although the superiority of social strategies over cognitive and metacognitive strategies cannot be claimed, at least the social strategies have the advantage that the progress of the learner and his comprehensive output can be noticed by anyone without subjecting him to any specific test. The social language learning strategies quickly improves the learner's communicative skills. The next section looks at the strategies which can be developed to foster the learners' learning of the language.

7. Which Language Learning Strategies to Develop?

Of the twenty-one language learning strategies used by the subjects of this study (cognitive, 9; social, 7; metacognitive, 5), none can really be treated as bad, because each of those strategies at one degree or another enables some learning. Each of them has its strengths and its weaknesses, but some of them deserve a special attention for development in the classroom, because they can better help teachers and learners. For example, "*singing and imitating musicians who sing in good English*" (Table 2) can be an enjoyable way of learning a language, but this is avoided by almost all teachers in senior classes in Cameroon. Most senior learners also find this strategy childish. "*Listening to the music in English*", "*watching films and television in English*", or "*reading newspapers in English*" (Table 4) are also very useful strategies which necessitate good development and orientation in the classroom, as they are strategies that very few teachers would image from French-speaking Cameroonian learners of English. This can be facilitated by the use of the new communication technologies which are easily accessible now. Although the percentage of learners who use these strategies is not very significant, they can all the same yield satisfactory results if well oriented by teachers with appropriate activities.

Social strategies such as "*I converse with English-speaking people*" (str.7), "*I do some writing and my teacher helps me correct it*" (str.11), "*I ask questions to my English teachers*", "*I exchange letters with my Anglophone friends*" (Table 6) were reported by very few learners, but they are also very efficient strategies which can enhance English learning if well oriented and encouraged. They can better foster the learner's communication skills. Indeed, most French-speaking Cameroonians are quite shy and reluctant when they attempt to speak English though many of them can correctly write what they have to say.

8. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study has shown that French-speaking Cameroonian advanced learners of English as a Foreign Language predominantly use cognitive language learning strategies in their learning process of the language. Though it cannot be said with certainty which learning strategy works best in second or foreign language acquisition, cognitive strategies in terms of output are difficult to assess. Social ones, while being easily observable and verifiable have the advantage of impacting speaking and writing skills. The subjects also marginally use some metacognitive strategies, which is an indication that they

do not plan and think about their learning and do not evaluate it. In the context of Cameroon where many French-speaking learners of English do not have enough exposure to English, developing, and orienting social language learning strategies, as suggested in Section 7, would not only enhance the learning of English, but may also foster bilingualism. Therefore, teachers should help their learners by allowing them to talk about their language learning strategies and problems. They should encourage learners to ask questions and share ideas with their peers about effective strategies they have tried. "Taking class time to talk about learning process will reap rewards for the students" (Oxford, 1990, p. 156). Cook's (1996) suggestions may also help, i.e. (1) exploiting the good language learner strategies that are useful to the students, (2) developing the students' independence from the teacher with learners' training or directed learning, (3) making students aware of the range of strategies they can adopt, (4) providing specific training in metacognitive strategies, and (5) remembering the similarities and differences between learning a second (or foreign language) and learning other school subjects (p. 108).

In short, given that language learning strategies vary from one learner to another and from one context to another, advanced French-speaking Cameroonian learners of English would more benefit from the development of some social strategies discussed here. These strategies will need to be balanced with some of the cognitive strategies they already amply use as well as the best metacognitive ones.

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Note

Note 1. *Terminale* is the equivalent of Upper Sixth.

Appendix

Please, answer these questions about your language learning strategies.

What strategies do you use to learn English? Tick as many answers as possible.

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Quelles stratégies utilises-tu pour apprendre l'anglais? Cocher autant de réponses.

☐ 1. I expect everything from the teacher.

   J'attends tout du professeur.

   Why? /Pourquoi?

☐ 2. I read my English course book and dictionaries.

   Je lis mon livre d'anglais et des dictionnaires

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 3. I read English grammar books.

   Je lis des livres de grammaire en Anglais.

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 4. At home I repeat exercises done in class.

   A la maison je reprends des exercices faits en classe.

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 5. I practise soliloquy and monologues.

   Je soliloque et fais des monologues.

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 6. I listen to the news in English and to English speaking people.

   J'écoute l'information en Anglais et écoute ceux qui parlent l'Anglais.

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 7. I converse with English speaking people.

   Je converse avec ceux qui parlent l'Anglais.

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 8. I converse in English with my classmates.

   Je converse en anglais avec mes camarades de classe.

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 9. I debate in English with my classmates.

   Je discute en anglais avec mes camarades.

   Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 10. I translate from my mother tongue or French to English.

    Je traduis de ma langue maternelle ou du français.

    Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 11. I do some writing and ask my teacher to correct it.

    Je fais des rédactions et mon professeur m'aide à les corrige.

    Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 12. I ask my friends to give me the correct form.

    Je demande à mes amis de me corriger.

    Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 13. I learn a new English word every day.

J'apprends un nouveau mot anglais tous les jours.

Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 14. I check every new word I use in a dictionary.

Je vérifie tout nouveau mot anglais que j'apprends dans le dictionnaire.

Why? Pourquoi?

☐ 15. I do group work in class with my classmates.

Je fais des travaux en groupe avec mes camarades de classe.

Why? Pourquoi?

16. List other strategies that you use and which are not mentioned above.

Cite d'autres stratégies que tu utilises et qui ne sont pas mentionnées ci-dessus.

Answer here/Réponds ici_____

17. In the strategies 1-12 above which ones are more efficient to you?

Parmi les stratégies 1 à 12 ci-dessus lesquelles sont plus efficaces pour toi?

Answer here/Réponds ici_____