

LEARNING STRATEGIES: THE “HOW” STUDENTS LEARN WITHOUT DIRECT INSTRUCTION ABOUT METACOGNITION

Abstract

Results of the research project “Foreign Language Learning Strategies used by Students of the Subject English level I” carried out in a Language Institute from a Colombian Public University, let us recognize the learning strategies used by students without receiving direct instruction about metacognition. Through the use of a field diary and two semi-structured surveys; and after analyzing the data, the result is the following: participants of this qualitative phenomenological study are autonomous, self-regulated, active and positive learners who chose technology as the main tool to improve their process, and who implemented strategies that let them have a friendlier approach to the language taught.

Key words: *English as a foreign language, Learning strategies, Self-regulated learning strategy, Technology.*

Resumen

Los resultados de la investigación “Estrategias de aprendizaje de lengua extranjera en estudiantes de la asignatura Inglés I” llevada a cabo en un Instituto de Lenguas que pertenece a una Universidad Pública de Colombia, nos permite reconocer cuales son las estrategias de aprendizaje que usan los estudiantes sin recibir instrucción directa acerca de qué es la metacognición. A través del uso de un diario de campo y de dos entrevistas semi-estructuradas y después de analizar los datos, el resultado es el siguiente: Los participantes de esta investigación de enfoque cualitativo bajo lineamientos del paradigma fenomenológico, son estudiantes autónomos, autorregulados, activos y positivos, además de esto los participantes usan herramientas tecnológicas para mejorar su proceso de aprendizaje e implementan estrategias que les permiten tener un acercamiento más amigable con el idioma extranjero.

Palabras clave: *Estrategias de aprendizaje, Estrategias de aprendizaje autorregulado, Herramientas tecnológicas, Inglés como lengua extranjera,*

Introduction

Taking into account the premise of the Self-Regulated Learning Strategy and the Learn how to Learn Theory as the “how” students learn is more relevant than the “what” they learn, this study aims to identify the learning strategies used, without any direct instruction about metacognition and its effects, by English Language students at a Language Institute from a Colombian Public University. Therefore, these are the objectives of this study: 1- to identify the learning strategies that students use in the English as a Foreign Language class at the Language Institute. 2- To characterize the strategies used by the English as a Foreign Language students.

The need for analyzing, identifying and characterizing the learning strategies employed by English students, will let us distinguish the way students assume the teaching process oriented by the professor in charge of the group.

This study was developed through a Master’s program taken at the Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga UNAB, under the guidance of the professor Christian Tovar in order to get the title as a Master in Education.

Context and Participants

According to Chomsky (2012), the objective of education is to provide people with the necessary tools to be able to learn by themselves. In other words, the biggest purpose of education is to help students identify the way they learn by knowing the kind of learning style they have. As well as to help students realize of the importance and positive effects metacognitive abilities can have in their learning process. As a result of this introspective exercise, people will become autonomous, engaged and responsible students empowered of their own learning process.

Therefore, before designing a plan to materialize that big purpose proposed by Professor Chomsky, it is necessary to work on my research problem, which takes place in the Institute where I work, teachers do not know which learning strategies students use in their English learning process without receiving direct instruction on metacognition. Following, it is possible to find information about the participants of this research project.

The seven participants of the presented study belong to five different undergraduate programs of a public Colombian University who are in the second semester of the year 2017. The participants take the subject English level I as this is a requirement for all the students of the University.

Table 1
Participants information

Participant	Academic Program	Genre	Age	Semester
1	Medicine	M	17	2
2	History	F	18	2
3	Music	M	17	1
4	Music	M	17	1
5	Geology	M	25	4
6	History	M	18	2
7	Metallurgical Engineering	F	19	4

Literature Review

Taking into consideration the research problem and the two objectives of this study, it is necessary to have a review of the following topics: Learn how to Learn Theory, Metacognition, Self-regulated Learning Strategy and English Language Learning. Check table 2 which will focus this research project in order to answer the research questions, that are: 1- What are the learning strategies used by the English Language subject students? 2- How do the students assume the teaching process oriented by the professor in charge?

According to Gardiner (1994), there are three important competencies students need to have in order to develop the learn how to learn art, they are: responsibility, the ability to change and the desire to learn constantly. Under this idea the presented research study focuses the theory on Metacognition (Flavell, 1979) which refers to the ability of self-observation by students, the how, when, and why use mental operations. It is said that students who are able to do that can identify their learning style in order to decide which activities do and the kind of strategies that better work for them.

Then, it is necessary to check the Self-Regulated Learning strategy, suggested by Zimmerman (1989) who mentions that self-regulated students are engaged with their learning process in a way that they have the capacity to make changes when something (an attitude, behavior, strategy) interrupts or avoids their learning process. Also, self-regulated learners are able to plan their learning process, monitor it and evaluate it to check if it is working or if it is not.

As the last issue taken into account I have to mention the Language Learning Strategies. Oxford (1990) mentioned that these strategies help students deal with cognitive problems in order to make them get closer to the effectiveness of the English Language

learning process. Richards (2006) who is the one of the exponent of the Communicate approach mentions the importance of provide lively experiences to the English students in class, in that way they will have a bigger idea of the practicality of knowing a second language.

Table 2
Theoretical Framework

Learn How to Learn Theory		
Metacognition	Self-regulated Learning Strategy	English Language Learning strategies
- Metacognitive abilities	- Characteristics	- Learning strategies
- Learning styles	- Role of students	- Communicative approach

Methodology

As this is a qualitative phenomenological study, it was necessary the use of the following three data collection instruments: the field diary and two semi-structured surveys; one for the students and one for the professor in charge of the group. In the following table the instruments are described:

Table 3
Data collection instruments.

Instrument	Description	Frequency
Field Diary	The researcher will take notes of the students' behavior without interrupting the class	Twice a week for one hour each
Semi-structured survey for the students	It will be applied in a different time from the class in order to gather information about how students think they learn, the tools they use and how they assume the teaching process oriented by the professor in charge	1
Semi-structured survey for the teacher	It will be applied once the observations have been done in a different time from the class. The idea is to know the teacher's perception of the way students assume her practice in the classroom and the way students learn.	1

As soon as information was gathered, the analysis took place with the purpose of presenting the findings.

Findings

The findings are going to be presented according to the two specific objectives of this research project, in that way they will be easy to understand.

Table 4
Conclusions according to the first specific objective of this study

1- to identify the learning strategies that students use in the English as a Foreign Language class at the Language Institute.

•Students are autonomous in their English learning process. They decide to use technology in order to get better results during the class and after it.	•The high level of the students' autonomy runs them to have a study plan in a different schedule from the class.	•The students' motivation is measured by the constant participation during the activities proposed by the professor in charge of the class. Who is the one of the external factors that provides an optimum learning environment.	•The students assume their English learning process with positive attitudes which lead them to an effective learning process.
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2- To characterize the strategies used by the English as a Foreign Language students.

Table 5

Conclusions according to the second specific objective of this study

2- To characterize the strategies used by the English as a Foreign Language students.

- The students use self-regulated learning strategies like: Seeking of help, Revision, Monitoring, self-assessment, organization and analysis of the learning environment.	- The students have accommodating and diverging learning styles.	- The students use self-assessment and feedback methods during the class.
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Conclusions

The following are the conclusions of this study:

- 1- The participants of this research project are autonomous learners who use technology as the main tool to improve their learning process.
- 2- The participants use self-regulated learning strategies without receiving any direct instruction about metacognition.
- 3- Students assume their learning process with positive attitude which leads them to a friendlier approach to English Language.
- 4- Students prefer team work and practical work instead of working on out of context activities.

5- Students take advantage of the optimal learning environment provided by the teacher in charge which allows them to try different kind of practical activities.

According to these findings, it is possible to say that the English Language students at the Language Institute from a Colombian University, who participated in this study use learning strategies unconsciously and those strategies have good effects in their learning process according to the analysis of the recollected data.

Recommendations

For following research projects on this topic, I recommend to have a contrast with a group of students that receive direct instruction on metacognition and self-regulated strategies, in order to check the real impact those strategies can have in English Language students.

As a second recommendation I suggest a design of workshops for teachers, with the purpose of making them realize of the importance of helping their students to reflect on their learning process, to know themselves and to identify the kind of students they are. Finally, I suggest teachers to include activities where technology plays a special role in the classroom, so students can explore their abilities with this tool in an academic field.

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