

# ***IMPROVING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THROUGH THE USE OF LEARNING STRATEGIES***

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## ***ABSTRACT***

The objective within this research was to know to which extent the metaknowledge about how people learn a second language could be significant for students so that they can optimize their learning in the target language. In order to find the departure point two tests involving both introversion/extroversion and right/left hemisphere dominance were given to the subjects. After obtaining the results, they were discussed with the students to make them aware of their usual learning processes as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Subsequently, they would concentrate on the other learning processes they needed to implement in their learning activities to best acquire a second language. Along the course, observation, discussion and meta-knowledge were frequently used to gain behavior awareness and positive changes.

**Key words:** meta-knowledge, learning strategies, awareness.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

No matter about how carefully distributed a syllabus on foreign language learning is, there are certain students' queries that may lack an answer. This could happen for several reasons such as time constraints, different learning styles (logical or verbal intelligences) or scarcely achieved previous knowledge (borderline students compared to distinction students).

This is why the midst of A2 level of the Common European Framework could be considered a sensible time for students to become more aware of the varied conditions one requires to absorb all of the different components of a language. For

instance, controlling a foreign language involves being accurate, but fluent at the same time; pronouncing words correctly, but also keeping smooth rhythm within sentences. All of this involves different kinds of brain functions (left/right hemisphere), and students are more likely to use one or another, so it is necessary to show them when these strategies have to be applied to best accomplish learning.

If students learn how to adequate their learning strategies to the content, they will succeed in using the target language, and may even become independent learners, who will surpass curriculum expectations and will continue their learning after formal/academic study.

## 2. DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

This research has chosen to use observation and self-evaluation to make students aware of their usual learning strategies.

### 2.1 OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESIS

The goal of this investigation is to provide students with the meta-knowledge about which mental processes are involved at the different stages of language learning so that, by being aware of these, they can make them

happen at the right stage even when this is not their usual learning strategy.

The hypothesis posits that if this meta-knowledge is successfully understood, felt, and noticed then students will be able to use it to adapt their strategies to the circumstances to best acquire the target language. **2.2 SAMPLE**

The five subjects who participated in this research belonged in the Business Technology of Instituto Tecnológico Superior Bernardo O'Higgins. Their English level was A2, and it fit according to the specifications of the Common European Framework. Two of them were

merit students of the mentioned level. One was a pass student, another was a borderline student, and the other, not only was she a borderline student, but had hearing problems, and tried to focus more on the written language than the oral language. In other words, it was a heterogeneous class, yet the small number of subjects could permit to personalize teaching in a way.

The course was run for 48 hours. They were held along 8 sessions, where they completed the course and reached the A2 level.

### **2.3 PROCEDURE**

After reading the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Teaching by Principles-An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy- Second Edition* by H. Douglas Brown of San Francisco State University, I decided to implement some of the suggestions it offered to help my students learn better. The chapter was called *Strategies-Based Instruction*. It posited that having students analyze what kind of learners they were and which strategies they usually applied, could help them modify certain weaknesses in learning and maintain strengths they already had.

Therefore, they were told to fill up three papers: a

right/left brain dominance test, an extroversion/introversion test, and a checklist on learning styles. These were also facilitated in the book.

Once the results of the first two were tabulated, they would be presented to the students so that they could learn more about their learning in a meta-cognitive way. Additionally they would obtain some advice on ways to improve their learning strategies. The checklist gave them examples of learning situations with a continuum of possible behaviors. Students realized what they usually did in the given situations and also discussed the best response to them.

Students would sometimes be observed on the use of the mentioned strategies, other times they would be asked about them, and their insights would be recorded.

### **3. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS DISCUSSION**

#### **Chart 1**

Results of the Right/left brain dominance test (adapted from E. Paul Torrance, *Your Style of Learning and Thinking*, 1987. Bensenville, IL: Scholastic Testing Service)

Category	Percentage
Quite right-	
brain oriented	
Moderately right-brain oriented	
No particular dominance on either side	
Moderately left-brain oriented	100
Quite left-brain oriented	

Source: own design

The results showed that all of the subjects were *moderately left-brain oriented*. This means these subjects could analyze the big structures in a given grammar topic, and, with some assistance from the instructor they would be able to notice the tiny differences that occurred within that structure. Because the focus of this research was to make them independent learners through strategies use, they were told to observe the internal elements of words, to notice the “smaller units” in the whole, especially when they were introduced to a new grammar pattern. This pattern was typical of a *quite left-oriented learner*, and was very

helpful when examining groups within groups. By following their structural analysis to the end, they could become independent learners or could understand that grammar topic in a full round way.

Additionally, because the results placed them as *moderate left-oriented learners*, their fluency could be slowed down by their natural way to focus primarily on accuracy. They were aware that when speaking a person ought to trust on the language knowledge they have on their minds. They understood the attention span of a listener fades if they hesitate too often to speak. As a collateral effect, they also accepted the importance of practicing through homework and exercises due to the lack of time for attending to detail in real situations. From that point on, they were willing to complete the tasks included in the workbook section and made the best use of it.

Another typical feature of *left oriented learners* is they have little tolerance to ambiguity or chaos, so the subjects of this research agreed to come terms with the fact that learning a language involves constant adaptation to new structures and vocabulary. It also involves the acceptance that sometimes facing a new language feature can seem slight or incipient at the moment, but the more encounters they have with it, the easier it will be to understand them.

They were told it was totally fine to find the translations in their native language either in words or structures if that made them feel sure, but that a general idea of the word was ok to until they had the chance to observe how this word or structure behaved in another situation.

### Chart 2

Results of the Extroversion/Introversion test

Category	Percentage
Quite extroverted	
Moderately extroverted	40
Moderately introverted	60
Quite introverted	

Source: own design

Students learned that acting extrovertly can be an asset when learning a second language. This is so because communication happens among a group. On communicative approaches, students work in pairs, groups or as a whole class, so introvert students may feel insecure when taking part in these activities and focus on this limitation rather than actually on the activity itself.

Teachers could help introvert students with

games and role-plays to consolidate knowledge. Singing songs can help them relax when pronouncing the language and activate mouth muscles that are important dominant in the target language.

Introvert students can also help themselves by talking to themselves in English until they feel sure about talking to other people. They could also keep a journal to write down their thoughts and opinions. The main point is getting to practice so that output takes place anyway.

Introvert students are sometimes shy, so they would rather speak only when there are no possibilities for them to get wrong. If they see mistakes as a normal part of their knowledge, they can benefit from them because their attitude will be committed to understand why this phrase is incorrect rather than to the impression they will make on others.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Along the course, I was able to observe some changes.

- Students were more willing to participate in pairs despite their English level. Before this experiment,

merit students preferred to interact with other merit students, and the same with the borderline students. After a specific talk about this, they saw that language is negotiation: we have to adapt our speaking skills to the listener's level, and that is a major strength because English is mostly used as a lingua franca. Thus its ultimate purpose is communication.

- They took risks for both, productive skills (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (reading and writing). For instance, they were given articles to read with questions and activities to do without the teacher's assistance. They dealt with them quite successfully.
- They understood they had to do some extra work differently and independently since their weaknesses

and strengths were their own. For example, the student with hearing problems had a dictionary for looking up new vocabulary rather than asking her teacher or classmates. This was new because in many classrooms in the city, students depend on their teachers and expect them to clarify all their doubts. This could be one of the reasons why students sometimes fail to

English.

- They developed selfconfidence and 60% of them mentioned their intention to continue their English studies after the graduated because they felt capable of succeeding in the challenge. It is worth mentioning most of this students did not consider English an important subject to pursue control in and saw it as "quite confusing". I dare to say that a

communicative approach may have been an additional

component that facilitated this change since the textbook that was used in this class had oral and written communication as its main goals.

- They developed tolerance to ambiguity and concentrated on the things that had to be dealt with at a specific moment. They accepted that a second language is a process and they had to do just one thing at a time, celebrating what they could learn that day.
- They used right-brain processes like guesses, looking for the main idea, using their intuition to understand the function or purpose of a phrase. This was reached, after inviting them to interpret a dialog or a phrase in their native language. This gave them control over the things they wanted to say.

- They learned from their mistakes and accepted them so they could modify them in their inter-languages. Correcting major mistakes was an activity done by the teacher as soon as the students received their compositions graded. Students understood what the problem was and how to do it correctly although the mistake was never addressed to a specific student.

- They discovered they had to set their own goals towards what they expected from a second language (English) and designed a strategy accordingly. For a businessperson, they decided that reading, writing and speaking would be important for their careers. They chose to continue their studies on English after they finished their mandatory course in the institute because

the felt able to accomplish it. This was probably the most important outcome of this research because it showed a remarkable shift on their intrinsic motivation.

Whatever it was that prevented them from progressing in the target language, had disappeared now, and they could eventually complete their second language learning.

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