AN EXAMINATION OF THE STRATEGIES USED FOR LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE BY SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BOTSWANA

Ambrose B. Chimbganda and Lovie E. Seru

Abstract

This study examines the strategies used by speakers of English as a second language in Botswana's senior secondary schools. The study was undertaken because many students in this country under-perform in their English Language final examinations at senior secondary school; and in order to establish the causes for their under-performance, the views of 150 randomly selected senior secondary school students were solicited through a questionnaire. The data were then analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. The results show that, although some students use facilitative strategies such as speaking and listening in English, using newly learned structures in real life situations, figuring out the meaning of something they do not understand and correcting their own mistakes, there are equally many students with shortcomings in the strategies they use for learning English, such as transferring structures from their first language to the second, giving up trying in the face of difficulties and being lowly motivated. To remedy the situation, it is suggested that teachers should frequently speak to individual students in order to establish the strategies they use for tackling different learning tasks, with a view to advising them on the use of appropriate strategies for various language skills. It is also suggested that the teaching approach and the English language syllabus be reviewed in order to meet the language needs of students in a technologically changing world.

Keywords: ESL, strategies, acquisition, learning, competence, proficiency

1. Introduction

In order to understand the students’ strategies for learning English as a second language (ESL), it is necessary to give first a brief account of the context of English language learning and teaching in Botswana, the role and status of the language, and the aims and objectives of teaching the language. These aspects influence the way in which students learn English at secondary school in the country.

The learning and teaching of English in Botswana can be traced to the work of missionaries from the second half of the 19th country who introduced western education. By 1885, when Bechuanaland was declared a British ‘protectorate’, some indigenous people already had a smattering of English through attending missionary-run schools that had been opened up in the country. Although the main purpose of the schools had been to spread Christianity, they provided an opportunity for acquiring western education through the medium of English.
Today, after forty years of independence, English remains prestigious and is the medium of instruction from the second grade onwards. Its status in education is defined by the National Language Policy (1994), which recommends the use of the child’s heritage language in the initial stages and the use of English in later years. At present, it is a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools, and all teaching is conducted in the language, except when students are learning Setswana, the native language of the majority of the learners. To enhance the students’ proficiency, many schools in the country encourage students to communicate in English, despite the fact that the majority of the learners and the larger society do not use it in routine situations.

At the policy level, English is the official language, while Setswana is used as the language of national ‘pride’ and ‘identity’ (Tsonope & Janson, 1991). The effect of this policy is that English is the language of government, legislature, judiciary, parliament, business, education and the media; while Setswana is used for interpersonal communication. The official status of English, however, ignores the language reality of the country, that is, English is a foreign language whose use is restricted to the privileged elite class.

Like many other developing countries where English is used as a second or foreign language, the teaching of English in Botswana has been influenced by linguistic theories originating from the ‘inner circle’ countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Over the years, the teaching of English in Botswana has been influenced by two major approaches: the audio-lingual approach and the communicative approach. The former emphasizes the form and structure of the language while the latter focuses on the pragmatic use, such as the creation of fluent meaning (Canale & Swain, 1980).

At the moment, the communicative approach is in vogue, in spite of the criticism that some teachers have found in it an ‘escape route’ for not teaching ‘grammar’. Kroes (1997) thinks that a re-evaluation of the approach is overdue because of the growing concern that functional literacy in many countries, after students have spent ten or more years learning in the mother tongue and in the second language, has dropped for communicative purposes in the work environment and for further study at tertiary level. To deal with the problem, Ellis (1994) advocates a ‘formal intervention’ in combination with ‘language in context’, i.e. the overt teaching of grammar done within a context.

In spite of these calls for a review, English language syllabuses in Botswana are still based on the communicative approach, focusing on ‘the four areas of functional contexts of learning and communication development’, which are listening, speaking, reading and writing (Carrasquillo, 1994: 5). In addition to these four macro skills, the syllabuses include study skills and literature in order to enhance the learning of the language, whose aim is to develop the students’ ‘organizational’ and ‘illocutionary’ competence in the language (Bachman, 1990).
2. Definition of the Problem

One of the challenges facing Botswana is how to improve the quality of education, and this has led to the establishment of two national commissions on education, which were tasked to investigate the problems affecting the country’s education system and to make recommendations for improvement. The first commission was in 1977, which released its findings the following year, and the second was in 1993 whose findings were published in 1994. As a result of these commissions, the learning and teaching of English in secondary schools was reviewed to include, among other things, the improvement of instructional materials, classroom methodology, student enrolment policy, syllabus review and teacher training.

Despite all these initiatives, students still under-perform in their English language examinations at high school. An analysis of the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) results (see table 1 below) shows that the majority of the students who sat for their English language examinations in the years between 2002 and 2007 were unable to get a credit pass of ‘C’ grade and better, which allows them to be accepted for further training in tertiary institutions. Given the fact that English is the official language of the country and is used in all spheres of life, one would expect the students to be reasonably proficient in it.

Table 1: Profile of BGCSE English Language Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of Candidates</td>
<td>22,016</td>
<td>18,029</td>
<td>17,812</td>
<td>17,440</td>
<td>17,242</td>
<td>17,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A*</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1,241</td>
<td>1,441</td>
<td>1,381</td>
<td>1,228</td>
<td>1,158</td>
<td>937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3,711</td>
<td>3,132</td>
<td>3,142</td>
<td>3,370</td>
<td>2,994</td>
<td>2,801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>9,140</td>
<td>6,327</td>
<td>6,619</td>
<td>6,822</td>
<td>7,572</td>
<td>7,117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>6,293</td>
<td>5,421</td>
<td>5,069</td>
<td>4,594</td>
<td>4,479</td>
<td>4,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1,277</td>
<td>1,287</td>
<td>1,231</td>
<td>1,049</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>1,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Botswana Examination Council: 2007 Examination Summary of Results by subject, p.6

To get to the bottom of the matter, the researchers hypothesized that the problem probably has to do with the strategies the students use and their motivation for learning English. To guide the study, the following questions were posited:

1. What strategies do the students use in learning English?
2. How motivated are the students in learning English?
3. In what ways can the students be helped to improve their learning of English?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Language Learning Strategies

Over the last few decades, there has been a gradual but significant ideological shift from second language ‘teaching’ to ‘learning’, emphasizing more on the strategic ‘use’ of the language than its ‘usage’; that is to say, focusing more on ‘fluency’ than ‘accuracy’. Here, the dichotomy is clear: the main pre-occupation is to encourage learners of English as a second language to develop their repertoire of language skills rather than their abstract knowledge of the language. Corrasquillo (1994) suggests that second language learners are privileged because they already have a first language system which they can use to learn the second language. Sewell (2003) agrees with Corrasquillo’s (1994) observation that second language learners intentionally employ a range of strategies in order to learn a target language. He notes that there are many factors which influence success in learning a second language, such as knowing particular strategies that foster language learning, especially the ones that can be employed in a language environment in which the target language is not learned naturally.

In trying to determine exactly what strategies are, the researchers used Chamot’s (2004:1) definition which states that strategies are ‘the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal’. Sewell (2003) uses the term ‘strategy’ in a similar manner to mean the techniques or procedures which a learner adopts intentionally in order to acquire knowledge; while Lessard-Clouston (1997) refers to them as behavior and thoughts that a learner engages in deliberately in order to influence learning outcomes. The point to underscore is that strategies are consciously used by a learner in order to accomplish a task; unlike language ‘skills’ which are used subconsciously and intuitively (Macaro, 2006).

Since language learning (unlike language acquisition which is spontaneous) is a guided process, it means that learners take deliberate actions to learn the target language. Klein (1986: 18) metaphorically refers to the learning of a second language as a ‘domestication’ process, because the learners intentionally choose strategies that help them to master some aspects of the language. Current research (e.g. Green & Oxford, 1995; Magogwe, 2008; Oxford, 1996) suggests that learners use cognitive strategies which are mental processes that allow them to perform a learning task. In using cognitive strategies students strategically select those strategies that work for them as individuals.

The other point about strategies is that they involve meta-cognition, which is a self-monitoring mechanism used by learners to evaluate their progress (Winn & Snyder, 1998). Because meta-cognition is an internal mechanism, the implication is that in order to identify the strategies used by a learner, the researcher has to rely on learner self-reporting through interviews, questionnaires, written diaries and so forth. Chamot (2004:3) notes that self-reporting often fails to account for the
various mental activities the learners go through due to the complexity of trying to unravel one’s inner thoughts or simply because the informants put up a ‘front’ in order to hide their personal weaknesses.

The role of vocabulary in learning a second language is increasingly drawing the attention of researchers in applied linguistics. Generally it has been found that a wide vocabulary facilitates the learning of a target language as well as the decoding of hidden meanings (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Pulido, 2004). Similarly, the use of strategies has been investigated in order to find out how male and female speakers of English as a second language use them in different social contexts (e.g. Chavez, 2001; Magogwe, 2008). Although there are no conclusive indications on the types of strategies preferred by each gender, generally the studies (e.g. Green & Oxford, 1995) show that females tend to use more meta-cognitive strategies than males. However, Chimbganda, (2000, 2006) and Phakiti (2003) did not find any gender-related differences in the manner in which speakers of English as a second language at university in Botswana and Thailand, respectively, use strategies; which suggests that our understanding of the strategies preferred by speakers of English in different contexts is far from being complete. In this study, however, the gender variable was not considered because it deserves a separate study on its own.

3.2. Motivation

In trying to determine the motivation for learning English as a second language, Rubin (1995:46) claims that a good language learner is ‘uninhibited and willing to appear foolish, desires to communicate or to learn from communication, attends to form, looks for patterns in language, and practices’. Rubin (loc cit) insists that a good language learner ‘monitors his own speech and that of others, and attends to meanings’. Sewell (2003) goes further to maintain that the ability to use strategies resides in personal factors such as age, intelligence, aptitude, motivation, self-esteem and the willingness to take risks. While agreeing with Sewell (ibid) on the factors that determine the use of strategies, Brown (2000) finds intrinsic motivation more influential than extrinsic, an issue considered earlier by Larson-Freeman and Long (1991) who suggest that extroversion and introversion are critical factors, especially when it comes to pronunciation, reading and writing.

With respect to the inherent styles a second language learner may prefer, Sewell (2003) argues that a learner may be motivated by a sense of achievement, i.e. the ability to tolerate language ambiguities, and how the learner is able to reflect on the learning styles. The tolerance of ambiguity in this context refers to the style that allows the learner to suspend structures that inhibit language learning and focus on those that foster the learning of the target language. In this regard, Sewell (2003) contends that people with reflective styles take longer to learn but make fewer errors, while those with impulsive styles are quicker but make more errors. In order to be more successful, he concludes that it is better if language learners are neither too reflective nor too impulsive, since both extremes may delay second language learning. Given these theoretical views on learning English as a second language, the researchers wanted to find out the specific strategies used by students at senior
secondary schools in Botswana, with the objective of trying to improve the learning behaviour of the students.

4. Method

4.1. Subjects
Altogether one hundred and fifty final year high school students voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The subjects were selected using a combination of stratified and purposive sampling techniques. One school was chosen purposively from each of the five regions in Botswana, and from each school one class completed a questionnaire. The participating schools represented rural, peri-urban and urban populations of the subjects. On average the students were 18 years old, who had been learning in English for an average of 9 years.

4.2. Instrument
For the data reported in this study a questionnaire was used, which was divided into three parts. The first part was designed to gather information on the learners' language background; while the second part solicited information on the strategies the students use for learning English as a second language, and the third sought information on their attitude and motivation for learning English. To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, it was pre-tested in a pilot study of 10 randomly selected students, who were later excluded from the actual study to avoid contaminating the results.

4.3. Data Analysis
The responses from the questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed using descriptive statistics, i.e. simple tables and percentages that show how the data are broadly spread and how they are related in terms of one aspect to the other. As the data were non-experimental, the researchers relied on interpretivism, which focuses on deconstructing surface appearances to reveal the hidden meanings of the research phenomena. The findings that follow show the strategies the students indicated they use.

5. Findings and Discussion
The first part of the questionnaire solicited information on the students' language background. Table 2 shows the students' responses to the questions on this section. The results show that the majority of senior secondary school students in Botswana spoke Setswana (68%) as their home language and 80% indicated that it was the language of their neighborhood. Twenty percent (20%) of the respondents indicated that they spoke a bit of English when they were young, while 7% indicated that they spoke both Setswana and Kalanga, the latter is a language similar to Shona spoken in Zimbabwe. A small portion (5%) used Afrikaans and Setswana in their homes and the neighborhood. This biographical information indicates that
many children in Botswana, who come from various linguistic backgrounds, start
school with very little or no knowledge of English at all. This may be one of the root
causes for their under-performance in English at high school, because they start to
learn the language at a time when the ‘critical period’ of acquiring a language
intuitively (Lenneberg, 1967), which is from the age of two years to puberty, is
almost over.

Table 2: Exposure to English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Languages spoken at home when a child?</td>
<td>i). Setswana</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ii). Setswana and a bit of English</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>iii). Kalanga and Setswana</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>iv). Setswana and Afrikaans</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Languages spoken in neighbourhood when a child?</td>
<td>i). Setswana</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ii). Setswana and a bit of English</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>iii). Kalanga and Setswana</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>iv). Afrikaans and Setswana</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Second/foreign language learnt?</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second part of the questionnaire (see Table 3) required the students to
indicate the strategies they use for learning English. In response to the fourth
question on how they learn English, 60% of the respondents indicated that they
learn through listening and talking, while 24% stated that they learn English for a
specific purpose and 16% indicated that they learn English when doing something.
From these responses, it appears that many senior secondary school students in
Botswana learn English interactively through listening and speaking, which is quite
useful, especially given the fact that the wider society in Botswana does not use
English for ordinary conversations. However, the strategy of learning English only
for a specific purpose and when doing an activity is restrictive, which probably
affects the students’ ability to use the language for various artistic purposes,
including academic work.

The fifth question required the students to state how successful they were in
guessing the meaning of something they do not understand in English. The
responses show that 20% indicated that they were often successful while 70%
indicated that they were sometimes successful and 10% stated that they were
unsuccessful. While it is gratifying that some students indicated that they were
often successful in their guesses, the majority indicated that they were either
occasionally successful or unsuccessful. This suggests that many high school
students probably do not try hard enough to figure out the meaning of something
they do not understand in English.
Table 3: Students’ ESL Learning Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strategy 1</th>
<th>Strategy 2</th>
<th>Strategy 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. How do you learn English?</td>
<td>Listening &amp; talking</td>
<td>Only for a purpose</td>
<td>When doing something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>90 (60%)</td>
<td>36 (24%)</td>
<td>24 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How successful are you in guessing the meaning of something you do not understand in English?</td>
<td>Often Successful</td>
<td>Sometimes successful</td>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 (20%)</td>
<td>105 (70%)</td>
<td>15 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What do you do if you do not understand something in English?</td>
<td>I make do with what I understand</td>
<td>Unsure, but try to figure out the meaning</td>
<td>I get frustrated and give up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>117 (78%)</td>
<td>27 (18%)</td>
<td>6 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What do you do when you find that you do not have the necessary English vocabulary to express yourself?</td>
<td>I use different words</td>
<td>I skip or change the message</td>
<td>I stop speaking or writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>135 (90%)</td>
<td>15 (10%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What do you do when you learn new English expressions?</td>
<td>Use them in real life</td>
<td>Use them when speaking to self</td>
<td>Use them during a test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>99 (66%)</td>
<td>45 (30%)</td>
<td>6 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How do you learn new English sentences?</td>
<td>I often use my first language as my resource</td>
<td>I sometimes use my first language as my resource</td>
<td>I always use my second language as my resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95 (63%)</td>
<td>35 (23%)</td>
<td>20 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you correct your own errors when speaking or writing?</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Only the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78 (52%)</td>
<td>57 (38%)</td>
<td>15 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. What do you do when you meet someone who speaks English?</td>
<td>Speak to her/him in English</td>
<td>Wait until s/he speaks first in English</td>
<td>Speak to her/him in my mother tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72 (48%)</td>
<td>55 (37%)</td>
<td>33 (15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sixth question is closely related to the fifth, but the idea in the sixth is to tease out what action the students take. The question required the students to indicate what they do if they do not understand something they hear or read about in English. The majority of the students (78%) stated that they make do with what they hear or read about and try to guess the rest. Eighteen percent (18%) stated that they were unsure, but try to figure out the meaning and 4% indicated that they become frustrated and give up. While it is a useful ESL learning strategy to take
risks (Ellis, 1987) by guessing and figuring out the meaning, the strategy of risk avoidance (Chimbganda, 2000), which is completely giving up trying, does not promote ESL learning.

The responses to question seven show a similar positive approach. The students were asked to state what they do when they find that they do not have the necessary English vocabulary to convey their intended message. Ninety percent (90%) indicated that they use different words, while 10% indicated that they skip the words or change the message and none of them stated that they stop speaking. Their responses show that the majority of senior secondary school students persevere by using different words to negotiate the meaning. The ten percent that avoid unknown words or alter the message run the risk of conveying incorrect meanings.

Question eight required the learners to state what they do when they learn new English expressions. Sixty six percent (66%) indicated that they try to use them in ‘real life’; 30% reported that they practise them on their own and 4% indicated that they use them only when writing a test. The students’ strategy of using newly learnt expressions in real life is consistent with the theory that language has a functional purpose, i.e. that it can be learned better in authentic situations. Even practising what one has learnt by speaking to oneself is also a facilitative strategy because it helps the learner to monitor the language input; but using newly acquired expressions only when writing a test limits the possibility of extending the experience of learning the second language.

Regarding question nine which sought information on how the students learn new English sentences, the majority of the respondents (63%) indicated that they often use their first language as their resource, while 23% indicated that they sometimes use their first language as their resource and 14% reported that they always use their second language as their resource. The fact that the students indicated that they ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ and ‘always’ use their first language to learn English sentences suggests that the students’ mother tongue has a great deal of influence in their learning of English. The idea of using one’s primary language as a springboard for learning the target language is supported by Canagarajah (2002), Kramsch (1993, 1998) and Widdowson (1996) who suggest that the first language is like a rich gold mine from which the second language can be dug out and purified into a fine ingot. However, this depends on whether the two languages are similar or not, i.e. where the rules are similar, positive transfer is likely to occur; but where the rules are different, negative transfer may take place (Nunan, 2001). Setswana and English have no similar roots, and that makes it difficult for the students to use one code to learn another unrelated language; and this may be one of the reasons why high school students in this country under-perform in their high school English language examinations.

The tenth question sought information on error correction (In this study the researchers define an error as an unconscious breaking of the rules of a language in a habitual and systematic manner resulting in the breakdown or partial breakdown of communication). The students were asked whether they correct their own errors during speaking or writing. In response to this question, 52% of the students
indicated that they ‘always’ correct their own errors, while 38% indicated that they ‘sometimes’ correct their errors and 10% indicated that only the teacher does so. These responses show that the majority of the students are concerned with the correctness of their speeches and written work. While it is laudable that students should be concerned with the accuracy of their work, especially correcting errors that are habitual and systematic, an overly concern with accuracy can inhibit ESL learning as the students will be afraid of making errors instead of focusing on their strategic competence.

The last question required the students to state what they do when they meet someone who speaks English. Forty eight percent (48%) indicated that they speak to the person in English, 37% indicated that they wait until the person speaks first in English and 15% stated that they speak to the person in their mother tongue. The students’ responses show that they are inclined to speak in English when they meet someone who speaks English; but there is also a reluctance to start a conversation in English perhaps due to their cultural etiquette. The fact that 15% indicated that they use their mother tongue to speak to a person who does not understand their language may be linked to national ‘pride’ and ‘identity’, which is part of the process of cultural preservation in a world dominated by the global influence of English.

The third part of the questionnaire (see table 4 below) sought information on students’ motivation and attitude to learning English. The table shows the pattern of their responses using a five point scale of: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Not Sure (NS), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). In answer to question twelve, 47% of the students strongly agreed and 21% agreed that they get frustrated and discouraged when they encounter difficulties in learning English; while 4% and 17% respectively disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 12% were not sure. The fact that 47% and 21% either strongly agreed or agreed that they get frustrated and discouraged suggests that many students lack inspiration and a sense of fulfillment. Perhaps this is the critical factor that decides the students’ progress in learning English as a second language, which impacts on their performance in the final examinations.

Table 4: Motivation to Learn English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Do you feel frustrated and discouraged by difficulties of learning English?</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you feel shy and embarrassed by expressing yourself in English?</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Do you feel highly motivated to learn English?</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding whether the students feel shy or embarrassed when they speak in English, 58% strongly agreed and 24% agreed, while the remaining 18% were either not sure, disagreed or strongly disagreed. The students’ reluctance to speak in
English suggests there may be a social stigma attached to it, such as the fear of being labeled ‘snobbish’ or ‘elitist’, or they may fear to be laughed at if they make mistakes. The tendency to shy away from speaking in English, particularly the fear of making errors, deprives them of an opportunity to interact with other speakers of English who can provide a resource for learning the language.

Concerning the students’ motivation to learn English, 46% strongly agreed and 9% agreed that they were. However, a total of 45% were either not sure, disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were highly motivated to learn the language. What is not clear from the students’ responses on their motivation is that, if many of them (55%) were motivated as they claimed they were, why would 82% of them say they were shy or were embarrassed to speak in English, as they suggested in question thirteen? The contradiction in the students’ answers seems to suggest that information volunteered by respondents may be sweet-coated; an observation made by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) who caution that respondents to a questionnaire often put up a ‘front’, i.e. they sometimes give information which does not necessarily reflect their best practices but the one they think does not expose their personal weaknesses.

6. Implications

There are two main implications that emanate from this study. The first is that since the students reported that they use a variety of strategies to learn English, secondary school teachers might find it useful to talk to their students so that they can get feedback on the strategies the students use individually when they learn different language skills. This could be done by asking them to record and evaluate the strategies they use deliberately to accomplish particular learning tasks. The teachers could also conduct personal interviews with individual students who have problems in the major macro skills, such as writing, reading and speaking so that they can know exactly the strategies the students use for learning these skills. These interviews could help the ESL students become more meta-linguistically sophisticated as they would carry out introspective analyses of their learning behaviour. This could also have a cascading effect on the teachers as they become more sensitive to the manner in which their students learn English as a second language.

The second implication is that since the students stated the strategies they prefer, they should be encouraged to use language strategies that suit their unique learning styles in different situations. To this end, Carrell (1989) suggests that effective second language pedagogy should include not only task-specific strategies but also a justification of the utility and outcome of the individual strategies. Here, we acknowledge the fact that individualized pedagogy can be arduous and time-consuming especially when dealing with large classes. However, it may be a pragmatic alternative to a situation in which the teachers do not bother to know the students’ strategies, the nature of the learning problems their students face and how the students can be assisted to overcome their ESL learning problems.
7. Conclusion

In this study it has been shown that although some high school students use appropriate strategies, such as talking and listening, guessing the meaning of what they do not understand in English, using different words to achieve the intended communicative goal and using newly learned English expressions ‘in real life’ situations, they are seriously handicapped by the unnatural context in which they learn English, whereby the target language is scarcely used for ordinary conversations. Also, the students’ attempt to transfer structures that already exist in their native language to the target language appears to pay minimal dividends because Setswana and English are unrelated languages. This may be one of the main causes for the students’ limited success in their high school English language examinations.

Regarding the students’ motivation to learn English— which is probably the axis around which everything else revolves—the findings suggest that many students lack inspiration and a sense of fulfillment as evidenced by their frustration in the face of difficulties and embarrassment in expressing themselves in English. The students’ reluctance to speak in English reflects the socio-linguistic reality of the language, i.e. English is used in the office or classroom but not for interpersonal communication. This situation does not foster a natural learning of the language which, in turn, has repercussions on the students’ performance in public examinations.

A final word about the findings of this study is that, although it is limited by the small size of the sample and the fact that the information that was voluntarily given by the students tended to ‘mask’ the complex issues involved in the strategies they use for learning English as a second language, the English language results point to the fact that something needs to be done to improve the situation. To tackle the problem, it would seem logical that at senior secondary school level the language syllabus and teaching approach should go beyond the confines of the communicative approach, which for many years has been accepted with unquestioning obedience, a holy cow, which ‘like the King of England in Byron’s Vision of Judgement, slips into heaven in the confusion’ (Kroes, 1997). It is perhaps prudent to take counsel from Dubin and Olshtain (1986) who insist:

The communicative approach is not a system which replaces older ones but rather alters and expands the components of existing ones in terms of content, course products and learning products.

To deal with the problems facing ESL learning at high school, there is need to foster the behaviours of ‘speaking’ in the target language, not only to others, but also to texts, talking and writing about them and linking them to the students’ own life experiences. In this way, students can be helped to make the learning of English as a second language more efficient, more personal and more exciting.
Works Cited


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