

## Strategies for Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition among High School Learners of English in Ghana: The Case of Senior High School Students in Ghana

Vida Owusuah Anokye and Zhong Langfeng\*

Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University, China

### Abstract

Language is a very important means of communication. It is very difficult to think of a society without language. English as a Second Language (ESL) is a traditional term for the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers in an English-speaking environment. That environment may be a country in which English is the mother tongue (e.g., Australia, the U.S.) or one in which English has an established role (e.g., India, Nigeria). The study specifically uses and recommends the strategies developed by O'Malley and Chamot in their study "Strategies used by Second Language Learners" in 1990 in which they suggest that learning strategies can be thought of as declarative knowledge that may become procedural knowledge through practice. The strategies fits the demographics of the respondents (Senior High School students in Ghana) as it is suitable for classroom learning and for young age learners whose motivation and attitudes affect their rate of learning a second language. The study also reveals the most pressing constraint that increasingly lowers the proficiency level of the respondents and suggests useful recommendations to avert them.

**Keywords:** English as second language; Learning strategies; Constraints to learning English language

### Introduction

Vocabulary is the basic unit of language. Without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed [1]. Vocabulary can be defined as "words we must know to communicate effectively; words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary)" [2]. The acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use because without an extensive vocabulary, we will be unable to use the structures and functions we may have learned for comprehensible communication. In applying the linguistic theory to second language acquisition, Gregg argues that in characterizing second language knowledge, as in characterizing primary language knowledge, it is necessary to differentiate between competence and performance [3]. A competence-based approach based on Chomsky perspective to SLA would therefore advocate the development of linguistic or grammatical competence as to be the central domain of second language learning [4]. Gregg goes along with this view and states, "As have often been pointed out, acquisition of language involves more than the acquisition of rules for the production of utterances [3]. It involves the acquisition of knowledge, including knowledge that will never find expression in output: knowledge of ambiguity, anaphoric relations, possible versus impossible interpretations of sentences, possible versus impossible sentences, and so forth. It is this knowledge, acquired or innate, that I believe should be viewed as the domain of SLA theory".

From a more psycholinguistic perspective, Bialystok [5] proposes a processing model which attempts to explain the distinction between the second language learner's knowledge of a second language and his ability to use that language. In the final development of his model, Bialystok argues that knowing a second language involves two distinct components: "the mental representation of systematic, organized information about the target language and the procedures for effectively and efficiently retrieving that knowledge in appropriate situations" [6]. Because these components are so distinct, according to Bialystok, the learning of each may be independent, except that a structure must be

represented mentally before it can be used [7]. In as far as the retrieval procedures of her model, Bialystok states that there can be a difference among the learners in 'efficiency', referred to as 'automaticity' which is seen as the basis for fluency. Because fluency is distinct from and independent of knowledge, a language learner may be accurate and hesitant, accurate and fluent, or inaccurate and fluent [7].

In applying the information processing theory of cognition and memory proposed by Anderson [8,9], O'Malley et al. [10] highlight Anderson's distinction of 'declarative knowledge' (what we know about or static information in memory) and 'procedural knowledge' (what we know how to do or dynamic information in memory). According to Anderson's theory, declarative knowledge includes examples of things we know about including definitions of words, facts and rules, and this type of knowledge is represented in long-term memory as abstract meaning. In applying this type of knowledge to SLA, information in either the L1 or L2 has a meaning-based representation and would be stored as declarative knowledge through either propositional networks or schema. This is factual and rule-bound information and the way it is organized in memory may have a substantial effect on the L2 learner's ability to transfer it effectively and accurately into the new language [10].

In English as a second language (ESL), learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking,

\*Corresponding author: Zhong Langfeng, Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University, China, Tel: +233 30 250 0179; E-mail: zhonglanfeng@ujs.edu.cn

Received July 30, 2018; Accepted August 30, 2018; Published September 04, 2018

**Citation:** Anokye VO, Langfeng Z (2018) Strategies for Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition among High School Learners of English in Ghana: The Case of Senior High School Students in Ghana. Arts Social Sci J 9: 396. doi: 10.4172/2151-6200.1000396

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reading, and writing [11]. With economic globalization and multi-polarization of the world, English becomes more and more important, because it is considered as the tool for absorbing and communicating information. Recent research indicate that teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers are not confident about best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times do not know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning [12]. English language is, needless to say, the language of instruction in Ghanaian schools, colleges and universities. It is also the language of all formal professions in Ghana. In Ghanaian schools all subjects such as mathematics, science, social studies (history, geography and civics), art, and information and communication technology are taught and learned through the medium of English. Yet English language is a second language to a vast majority of Ghanaian students regardless of their stage in the education ladder [13]. The stark fact is that English language is not the language that parents or relatives spoke to those students at home; nor it is the language spoken to them in the larger network of communities in which they were socialized during their infancy, teenage, and adolescent formative years. Consequently, we are not surprised at all when recently a Ghanaian education official was reported as saying that Ghanaian primary and junior secondary teachers have difficulties teaching English effectively. Most Ghanaians frown on the phrase that English language is a second language to them, because they feel and believe that they possess a measure of English proficiency equal to native speakers of the language in Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, the United States, and South Africa. This means that English language has absolutely no cultural roots in Ghanaian linguistic history and for that reason it is not the language spoken in wider social circles in Ghanaian communities. There may be some truth in that assertion but having English as a second language does not necessarily suggest a lack of proficiency in that language. It does mean also, as one expert has stated, that English language has absolutely no cultural roots in Ghanaian linguistic history and for that reason it is not the language spoken in wider social circles in Ghanaian communities.

Specifically, the study seeks to address the following objectives:

- Describe the socio-economic characteristics of the students which affect their rate of acquisition of English vocabulary as a second language.
- Discuss the various vocabulary learning strategies and how it is applied to help the students in acquiring the second language.
- Identify and rank the constraints that hinder the ease of acquisition of the English language vocabulary.

This research study aims to investigate the significant contribution to the development of learning strategies within Second Language Acquisition studies through reviewing empirical and theoretical works from various literature and the use of demographic features from the respondents. The thesis is also aimed at defining learning strategies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and at analyzing approaches to identify which of these approaches guide teachers in applying appropriate methods that promote the use of learning strategies in the process of SLA.

This kind of information can be useful, not only for the teaching of English in the classroom but also to the Ministry of Education, especially to language planners and writers in their decision-making. The study should also contribute to the research literature in the field of Second Language Acquisition.

This study will therefore be a strong advocate of balanced English

language instruction throughout senior high schools in Ghana. It will provide the best acquisition strategy that would highly motivate students to practice the English vocabulary willingly rather than being compelled to do so for fear of detection and punishment.

## Materials and Methods

### Study area and coverage

Ghana is a unitary presidential constitutional democracy, located along the Gulf of Guinea and Atlantic Ocean, in the sub region of West Africa with spanning land mass of 238,535 km<sup>2</sup>. The country is classified as a middle income country (IMF, 2013). The secondary general education in Ghana is assumed by the Senior High School (SHS). The Senior high school's curriculum lasts 3 years, as a result of numerous reforms: Originally a three-year curriculum, it was extended to 4 years in 2007. However, in early 2009 this reform returned SHS to a 3-year curriculum. The length of the SHS is still a disputed question. The SHS curriculum is composed of core subjects, completed by elective subjects (chosen by the students). English language is, needless to say, the language of instruction in Ghanaian schools, colleges and universities.

### Data and sources

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from primary data source. Qualitative data that helped to assess the respondents (Senior High School students in Ghana) perception of English as Second Language in their academic discourse were collected through key informant interviews and structured questionnaires. The perception of the respondents in English as Second Language was assessed based on the operational modalities like, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciations and many others.

Structured questionnaire was prepared to collect quantitative data on the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents (Senior High School students in Ghana) for the study. Primary data will be obtained through a well-structured questionnaire that will be presented to tomato farmers for answers in an interview. A total of hundred (100) senior high school students (respondents) in Ghana will be interviewed for the study. A multi stage random sampling technique will be adopted for the study. The random sampling will be used in order the obtain respondents with different proficiency level in the English Language and to make more room for wider variation in data.

### Analytical techniques

The study adopts descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, bar chart, pie chart, percentages and tables to describe the demographic factors of the senior high school students in Ghana which affected their rate of acquisition of English vocabulary as a second language. These factors include gender, age of the student, English proficiency, motivation, number of languages spoken by the student and contact hours for learning English language. In acquiring English as Second Language, various vocabulary learning strategies will be identified from literature and previous research studies and given detailed explanations on how they are applied to suit various learning environments and academic discourse. The main purpose is to help increase the rate of English Language acquisition with regards to the various demographic features of the respondents. To identify and rank the constraints that hinders the ease of acquisition of the English language vocabulary, constraints identified from literature which include unqualified language instructors, inadequate learning materials, poor learning environment, influence of first language, age disadvantage and anxiety

will be given to the respondents (Senior High School students in Ghana) to rank from the most pressing to the least pressing constraint. Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance will be used to rank the means of the constraints. The coefficient of concordance would be tested for significance.

$$W = \frac{12 [\sum T^2 - (\sum T)^2 / n]}{nm^2 (n^2 - 1)}$$

Where,

W: Kendall's coefficient of concordance

T: sum of ranks for factors being ranked

n: number of factors being ranked

m: number of respondents.

## Results and Discussion

### Demographics of respondents

Data from the study area (Ghana) indicated that a high proportion of the respondents (senior high school students in Ghana), of 61% were females whereas 39% were males. Also, most of the respondents (47) were between 16 to 20 years of age representing 47%. Students who were 15 years and below being the lowest proportion with 13 respondents, representing 13%. The next higher proportion of the respondents by age was those within the year range of 21 to 25 years of age with 24%. Students who were above 25 years of age were 16, representing 16%. The minimum age is 13 and maximum 28 with an average of 20.5. A statistical description of the level of proficiency of the respondents (senior high school students in Ghana) in English Language as a second language showed that 46 out of the 100 respondents were in the elementary level, 36 being intermediary and 18 students in advanced level of English Language proficiency. On the level of motivation from both within the respondents and the external environment to learn English Language, there was a close correlation between students who were highly motivated, moderately motivated and a normal motivation with 24, 27 and 22 students respectively in each case. Students who were not so much interested were 15 with those who detested learning English Language being 10 out of the 100 respondents. A survey on the number of native languages spoken by the students which are considered as first languages in Ghana indicated that most of the respondents, 38 out of 100 spoke both two and three different native languages, 14 spoke four languages, 7 spoke only one native language and 3 spoke five or more native languages.

### Learning strategies in English Language as second language

Learning strategies represent one of the key determinants of language acquisition and educational achievement. There are variations of learning strategies which have been discovered by several researchers and scholars in their literature on language acquisition and educational achievement and the differences are primarily due to different research methods (such as observation, interviews, or questionnaires) or measuring strategies at different language tasks and in different contexts (such as foreign language learning or second language acquisition or on learners with different L2 level of competence).

Nevertheless, all the strategies seek to achieve the following objectives;

- Allow learners to become more self-directed.
- Expand the role of language teachers.

- They are problem-oriented.
- They involve many aspects, not just cognitive.
- They can be taught.
- They are influenced by variety of factors.

Wenden and Rubin [14] define learning strategies as any set of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information. This research study adopts the learning strategies developed by O'Malley and Chamot [15] in their study "Strategies used by Second Language Learners" in 1990. The reason for this choice of learning strategy is how well the strategies address all the objectives an ideal strategy should do as stated above.

O'Malley and Chamot [15] distinguish three broad types of learning strategies:

- Cognitive
- Metacognitive
- Socioaffective.

In their study, Cognitive strategies involve the physical and mental manipulation or transformation of the material to be learned, such as resourcing, repetition, grouping, deduction, imagery, auditory representation, key word method, elaboration, transfer, inference (guessing at meaning based on the context or prior knowledge), note taking, summarizing, recombination and translation. Meta-cognitive strategies involve "knowing about learning and controlling learning through planning (including advance organizers, directed attention, functional planning, selective attention and self-management), monitoring (checking, verifying, or correcting one's comprehension or performance in the course of language task) and evaluating the learning activity (checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against a standard after it has been completed)". Socioaffective strategies mainly involve the learner in communicative interaction with another person. It regulates the emotions, motivation, and attitudes of the learner. Examples are when students report using peer cooperation to achieve a learning goal, question the teacher for clarification, or direct their own attention to positive thoughts anticipating successful task performance.

### Constraints to the learning of English Language by the respondents (senior high school students in Ghana) as second language

Out of a list of constraints relating to the learning of English Language identified from literature and scholarly publications that were presented to the respondents, the major one faced by the senior high school students in Ghana is inadequate learning materials followed by the influence of their first or native languages. Age disadvantage was the least of constraints the students faced.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The study established a more suitable type of classification of learning strategies, the work of O'Malley and Chamot [15] in their study "Strategies used by Second Language Learners" in 1990. This type of classification is deemed fit with regards to the demographic survey of the respondents (senior high school students in Ghana). The three strategies developed in their study, that is, Cognitive, Metacognitive and Socioaffective learning strategies are suitable for learners in a younger age range and whose language of teaching other courses is

somehow related if not exactly the language in which learners try to acquire as a second language to their native languages spoken.

Therefore this research study highly recommends that teachers and instructors of the English Language for the respondents and the general population in which they represent should relate the behavioral characteristics of the learners to one or all of the three learning strategies explained in this publication to help them attained a more advanced proficiency in their English Language acquisition as a second language. From the list of constraints to learning English Language presented to the students to rank, the outcome will lead to a recommendation by the study that to ensure a serene learning atmosphere, an enough resourceful learning materials and highly trained English Language teachers and instructors will be an accelerating factor in increasing the proficiency level of the students. Therefore, the Government of Ghana through its Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service should ensure that individuals that teach English Language in schools should have enough training themselves to have command over the various sections from grammar, comprehensions and compositions to be able to guide the young individuals to learn the language successfully. Textbooks, audio-visual materials that will be required should also be made available to the schools which goes in a long way to kill anxiety and serves as a greater motivation to the students to learn the English Language successfully.

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