



HIDDEN FACTORS BEHIND MEMORY STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study explores how learning strategies used by a student in a Sociolinguistics class at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (Uptc) influenced memory. In order to achieve this objective, a descriptive and interpretative research was developed. In this particular case, this study was conducted in such a way that we could identify both personality and socio-cultural factors that influence the selection of learning strategies. Valuing myself, internal force, teacher's method and life experience were the categories found; these become important for teachers in terms of their methodology, due to the fact that, students can choose their learning strategies from this variable.

Key words: Learning strategies, memory strategies, personal and sociocultural factors.

Resumen

Este estudio explora los factores que inciden en las estrategias de aprendizaje de la memoria empleadas por un estudiante de una clase de Sociolingüística de la Uptc. Para alcanzar este objetivo, se desarrolló una investigación descriptiva e interpretativa. Para este estudio en particular, la investigación se desarrolló de manera tal que se pudo identificar tanto factores personales como socioculturales que influyen en la selección de estrategias de aprendizaje. Valorándome a mí mismo, fuerza interior, el método del profesor y la experiencia de vida fueron los factores encontrados; los cuales se constituyen en elementos importantes para el profesor en términos de la metodología que emplee, dado que los estudiantes pueden elegir sus estrategias de aprendizaje basados en ésta.

Palabras clave: estrategias de aprendizaje, estrategias de la memoria, factores personales y socioculturales.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a great change within the learning and teaching contexts in recent years due to the higher emphasis given to learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. How learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember information is being analyzed by researchers in the educational field.

In that sense, Stearn (1992: 261), says: “the concept of learning strategy depends on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals, and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques”. It means that all the steps and procedures employed by students to achieve their learning goals are defined as learning strategies.

Considering that this short scale project is framed within the field of learning strategies, we developed a diagnostic process with the purpose to identify which strategies were used by a student in a Sociolinguistics class. So the information which showed us the following was gathered through field notes (observations):

During the first observation, we notice that the student we selected listened to what the teacher was explaining and then took some time to think about this before participating. At the moment of giving her opinion, she made some comments about what she had understood and asked questions, too. It was also evident that when the teacher explained something on the board, she organized the

information in semantic mapping. When the teacher spoke, she just wrote some short sentences or key words.

Along the second observation, the student developed the same actions that she did the first time. At the same time, when she did not understand, she asked for the teacher’s explanation and often used color pens (black, blue...) or capital letters to remark those aspects that she considered important. As the teacher gave more information about some topic mentioned before, she used some linking marks (+, °, #,). At that moment, the whole class was following a reading, she underlined some sentences and wrote some notes as well as examples on her reading paper based on the teacher’s clarification.

It is also important to mention that an interview developed with the purpose of knowing the student’s likes and dislikes about her learning process, let us corroborate what we had observed. For instance, she said: “eh... in my classes I usually associate what the teacher explains with my previous knowledge, so I feel comfortable to participate. I like to use key words and make mind maps and I also take a lot of notes...” All this evidence corroborates that the strategies the student used the most were Memory strategies. This denomination is based on Oxford’s taxonomy (1990) which has to do with language learning; so it would be an interesting finding to see how memory strategies could work in the Sociolinguistics class which is focused on the study of language use not on the language learning.

According to Gu (2005) successful learners intentionally select, consciously monitor and evaluate the strategy they use for the fulfillment of their aim. The unsuccessful learners, on the other hand, employ learning behaviors similar to their peers without being conscious but also without having an aim (Gu, 1994; Gu, 2005). In that sense, it is important to have in mind that a successful student should be able to understand, learn and put into practice the knowledge and the different concepts he/she constructs and reconstructs along life.

To do that, all learners, needless to say, use several learning strategies in the learning process. Surrounding these tools there is the influence of factors like age, gender, personality, motivation, self-esteem, life-experience, learning style, and many others. These factors affect the way in which students learn. So, it is not coherent to believe that all learners use the same learning strategies or should be guided to use and develop the same strategies to become successful learners.

Objective

The main objective of our research project is to analyze which factors influence the memory learning strategies used by a student in a Sociolinguistics class at the Uptc.

Theoretical framework

In the following lines, you will find the theoretical considerations, under which this research project is framed, as well as, our own position in relation to them.

The concept of “**learning strategy**” depends on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals. Learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques” Stearn (1992: 261).

In addition, Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) state that “learning strategies are those procedures used in learning, thinking and so on, which serve as a way to reach a goal”. Strategies can be used in many different ways. “They can be used to introduce a concept in a way that will stick and provide a palette for the student to use as he works to expand his understanding of the concept. Strategies can also be used to reinforce a concept in a way that provides a tool to help the student retrieve the known information” as Regina Richards (2008) claims.

These definitions let us associate and define learning strategies as the techniques, procedures or tasks the student uses in order to achieve his/ her learning objectives.

In that sense, we chose Oxford’s model. Even when, this is focused on Language Learning Strategies, its main function in this research has been to characterize the strategies developed by the participant under study. As this model is being used in a particular context in which the student is not learning a language, but analyzing the use of her mother tongue, such taxonomy would let us know whether or not these strategies are adaptable by a learner in any context, and for specific purposes. So, Oxford defines Memory Strategies as those “strategies that help students store and retrieve information, and divides them as follows:

Memory strategies

- a. Creating mental linkages: It consists of grouping, associating, elaborating and placing new words into a context.
- b. Applying images and sounds: It involves using imagery, key words, semantic mapping and representing sounds in memory.
- c. Reviewing well: This strategy implies making a structured reviewing.
- d. Employing action: It means to use physical response or sensation and mechanical techniques.”

The choice of which memorization strategy to use will depend on their understanding of their own learning processes and on which strategies have been successful in the past (Hsiao, 2004).

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to describe the study we developed, this section presents crucial aspects about the requirements for the investigation: the type of research, the setting, the participants, the instruments and the process for data collection.

With the purpose of answering the question stated in this research, we developed a **qualitative paradigm** which according to Merriam (cited by Nunan, 1998: 77) is “an intensive, holistic, descriptive analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit”. Moreover, this research **was descriptive** as well as **interpretative** because it presented a detailed account of the phenomenon under study and contained a description to collect information in order to interpret and construct new knowledge. In our particular

case, the research was conducted in such a way that we could identify both, personality and sociocultural factors that influence the selection of learning strategies.

This research project took place at the UPTC in the Sociolinguistics class. This class is offered to seventh semester students of Modern Languages in their mother tongue, Spanish. The purpose of this subject is to provide students the theoretical and practical tools to study the language, using concepts and research methods through which he/she can make language his/her subject of study.

This research was carried out with one student of that class. This was a 22-year-old woman with an intermediate level of English. She liked to take as much notes as possible, to use key words, conceptual maps and to associate information. However, she disliked teachers who speak all the time without giving her opportunity to participate.

To gather data for our diagnosis, two techniques were used: classroom observation (field notes) and an interview (questionnaire). On the other hand, classroom observation was conducted in our attempt to find out the learning strategies used by a student in the Sociolinguistics class. On the other hand the interview was applied to get to know the student's likes and dislikes about her learning process.

In order to achieve the research objective the same techniques mentioned before were used. Four observations were developed to find information about the possible factors that influence the student's use of memory

learning strategies and the interview was a complement for this data.

The development of this research project followed the next steps: the first was to take field notes oriented to observe the student's attitudes, behaviors and activities she developed in the class. The second was to apply an interview to the student after four observations. Once the information was gathered, it was analyzed and organized through categories which allowed us to accomplish our research objective.

Data analysis and findings

In the following lines, we describe the process we carried out with the purpose of analyzing the information we gathered. Initially, the variables found as a result of a categorization process of the data collected are explained. Then, the findings are presented.

Category 1. Valuing myself

This variable has to do with the attitudes, behaviors and feelings assumed by the participant along with his/her classes in spite of existing inhibitions from the context.

Category 2. Internal force

It is the second variable, which implies the energy the student devotes to develop tasks along his/her learning process.

Category 3. Teacher's method

It is a variable that involves the way through which the teacher puts students in contact with learning.

Category 4. Life experience

This involves the student's previous experiences or background in his/her learning process.

Based on these categories, our findings were the following:

Valuing myself: this variable or factor certainly influences student's use of Memory Strategies because at the moment of using them, she does not care about inhibitions in the context such as partners' comments (chupa, comecaderno...), contents difficulty, teacher's attitude, classroom activities or any other reason. On the contrary, the most important thing for her is to succeed in the learning process. This is reflected in the attitudes and behaviors she assumes: active and positive. These considerations are evident when she said:

"Generally I take my own notes... I like to demonstrate that it is clear for me what is being explained. It is a way to corroborate my comprehension... When I don't understand something, I obviously ask for my partners' help or for the teacher's".

Internal force: this factor also plays a crucial role in the student's selection of strategies in the sense that she has clear objectives in relation to the subject and her learning process. So, it allows her to use Memory Strategies to accomplish them. At the same time, the nature of this force is determined by two elements: *intrinsic and instrumental motivation*. She claimed:

"the need for learning is what motivates me the most... I take notes in spite of my

attention, because I'm not able to remember everything ... if I write, make connections and use conventions or conceptual maps, It helps me to remember and to identify what the most important for me to study is “.

Teacher's method: this is the factor that influences the student's use of Memory Strategies the most. It is supported by the methodology the teacher uses to develop the class. In this particular case, because of the dynamics of the teacher's method the student did not have the opportunity to apply other strategies through several activities. In relation to this, the participant claimed:

“depending on the methodology used by the teacher, because for instance in the Sociolinguistics class the teacher talks and explains all the time and we necessarily have to write, while in other subjects the dynamic or the activities are different”

Life experience: This involves the student's previous experiences or background in his/her learning process. Thus, the student stated:

“when I was in the school, I depended too much on the teacher to take notes. Now, I'm more conscious and autonomous... Now what I consider most important for me is what I write in my notebook”

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

After the development of this project, we could conclude that the main social factor

in our participant's use of Memory Strategies is Teacher's Method. Nevertheless, there is an influence from personality factors such as, the value the participant holds towards herself, as well as, her motivation to apply those strategies.

Although, life experience was not an evident factor in the observations developed; the student did point out its importance. For that reason, it could be meaningful to study this variable in coming investigations.

As the researchers in this study, we could perceive that the student uses Memory Strategies in other subjects. Due to the fact that she said that in some extent, these are suitable in her learning process, especially for remembering and retrieving information.

Moreover, we consider that gender and age as learning variables could have an influence on the use of certain learning strategies, but in order to make it evident, it is important to have a significant sample of study. It means a group of people that includes the two genders and different ages. At the same time, this aspect could allow the project have wider scopes.

Finally, we consider the results of this research useful for our participant and in some extent for teachers too. The student can be aware of the positive or the negative effects of the factors influencing her selection of strategies. At the same time, teachers can become conscious about the methodology they are developing, due to the fact that, students can choose their learning strategies from this variable.

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