



# An Exploration of Strategies Used to Learn EFL/ESL: A Phenomenological Study

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**Abstract:** The study was phenomenological that used to explore strategies used to learn EFL/ESL among five PhD candidates and I, the researcher, myself. It is phenomenological study that particularly focuses on the lived experiences of learners in their strategy used to learn English as a foreign or second language. The five candidates were selected purposefully to investigate the strategies they had been used to learn English language at their secondary or primary education levels comparing with the strategies I had been used at the same stage. In this research, phenomenology methodology was adopted as a research design to collect data and to explore the issue in detail. Interview as a research tool was used to investigate the lived experiences. Based on the study, these findings were identified as strategies that help learn English easily are family support, practice, translation method, memorization, experience sharing and readings as learning strategies students frequently used to learn English as a FL or SL. The study also confirmed that the first language learning strategies support the second/foreign language learning not hindrance.

**Keywords:** ESL/EFL, Phenomenology, Language Learning Strategies

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## 1. Introduction

Language learning strategies are arguably one of the most researched areas in ELT due to the important role they play in foreign/second language learning. The pertinent literature defined language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” [10]. Similarly, Chamot [1], states that learning strategies are procedures that facilitate learning tasks.

However, it was one of the most researched areas in ELT; language learning strategies again needs fresh sight to its effect on language competence. More than the strategies teachers could give to students to learn effectively, the learning strategies learners by themselves used brought about more impact factor in the process of teaching and learning of English because the learning strategies learners used realize learner-centeredness approach to learning language.

In her seminal work on language learning strategies, Rubin [13] divided language learning strategies into “direct” and

“indirect.” Direct strategies include metacognitive and cognitive strategies, while indirect strategies include communicative and social strategies. According to Rubin [13] learners use three types of strategies that contribute either directly or indirectly to their language learning. These are Learning Strategies, Communication Strategies, and Social Strategies.

Learning Strategies are divided into cognitive and meta-cognitive and contribute directly to the language system created by the language learner. Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or measures learners take to learn or solve problems, which involve direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Rubin [13] identified memorization, monitoring, practice, deductive reasoning, clarification/verification, and guessing/inductive, and inferencing as cognitive learning strategies that contribute directly to language learning.

Metacognitive strategies, which have been found to be used more than the other strategies by English as Foreign Language (EFL) students due to their stronger impact on language proficiency development in contexts with limited exposure to the target language, are used to supervise, control,

or self-direct language learning (Rubin [13]). Rubin found that they involve different procedures: planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

According to Griffiths [6], LLS theory rests on a number of premises. One of them is that language learning is a cognitive process and learning occurs through interaction, which redefines the role of the learner as a dynamic and active meaning constructor. Moreover, language learning strategies are learnt, which allows learners to choose the appropriate strategies with teachers in a strong position to facilitate their development and raise awareness about their importance and encouraging their use. Tseng [16] found that

*Language learning strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of language learning. Language learning strategies give language teachers valuable clues about how their students assess the situation, plan, select appropriate skills so as to understand, learn, or remember new input presented in the language classroom. (p. 324)*

Griffiths [6] stressed that not all Language Learning Strategies are suitable for all learners, since learners vary and since Language Learning Strategies are governed by various factors. According to Oxford and Ehrman [12], aptitude, motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, age, gender, cultural background, stage of learning, language learning goals, previous language learning experience, career or academic specialization, language learning styles, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) versus English as a Second Language (ESL) settings are factors that affect a learner's choice of Language Learning Strategies. Reflection on and conscious choice and orchestrated use of a large number and wide range of appropriate and well-tailored combinations of Language Learning Strategies for active involvement, therefore, leads certain language learners to improve their target language proficiency and enjoy a high level of self-efficacy and success [11] and be labeled as "good," "effective," and "successful" due to being independent, self-regulated, and actively involved in language learning and their ability to solve problems pertinent to their learning, regardless of the methods or teaching techniques they encounter [11].

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena: their nature and meanings. The focus is on the way things appear to individuals through experience or in their consciousness [5]. The phenomena that individuals experience after all become a lived experience. According to Johar, D. A. [8], lived experience is a study which is a part of phenomenological research and focuses on human experience and consciousness in finding the truth. Similarly, Creswell [2], states that phenomenological research describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomena whereas Leedy and Ormrod [9], defines it as an attempt to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understanding towards a particular situation.

Therefore, this study is phenomenological study that particularly focuses on the lived experiences of learners in their strategy used to learn English as a foreign or second language.

### 1.1. Research Questions

The basic research questions are the following.

- 1) How do we learn language? How does a baby experience the learning of language?
- 2) What are the strategies mostly used to learn second/foreign language?
- 3) How different is it from learning second/foreign language?
- 4) What has to be done to overcome challenges of learning English as a second/foreign language?

### 1.2. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to explore second/foreign language learning strategies. Specifically, the study is opted to:

- 1) Identify second/foreign language learning strategies
- 2) Examine students' experience of learning English as a second/foreign language
- 3) Show the relation between first and second/foreign language learning strategies
- 4) Investigate challenges that faced the learning of second or foreign language
- 5) Recommend concerned bodies how to teach English as a second/foreign language

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

The purpose of this research is to identify language learning strategies that used by non-native speakers of the language. To bring this study to its effect, the researcher applied a phenomenological study as a research design to explore the lived experiences of learning English as a foreign language at different levels. In this research phenomenology methodology was adopted as a research design to collect data. As a research design, phenomenology in general is rigorous and critical. It can help to unveil and generate the learning strategies key informants used in learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, qualitative data has an important place in this phenomenological study to help capture an essence, enrich experiences, and explore lived *experiences used to learn EFL*.

According to Hailom Banteyerga [7], a phenomenological research approach is exploring the lived experience of learning and using language. Similarly, Hailom [7], describes and explains a phenomenological study as a real and lived experiences of a phenomena without metaphysical and theoretical speculations.

Phenomenology is a research approach that explores the lived experience of learning and using language. It describes and explains real and lived experiences without metaphysical and theoretical speculations. It also shows how changes take place in what we do. The research has taken consideration to the notions of the phenomenological approach which includes: intuition, intentionality, subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and empathy.

## 2.2. Data Sources

The major sources of data collection in this phenomenological study were from the informants who were five PhD candidates of ELT at Addis Ababa University. The five candidates were selected purposively to be interviewed in this exploratory study. In addition to this, the researcher's personal experiences' memo was also used to support the data obtained from the five candidates to identify shared experiences.

## 2.3. Instruments of Data Collection

The methods of data collection the researcher used in this study were interview and memo. The three key informants were interviewed and the researcher's personal experience memo was used to support the exploration.

## 2.4. Procedures of Data Collection

Interview guide was prepared having open ended questions enquiring the way students were learning English as a foreign language when they were at primary and secondary schools. Therefore, the researcher's personal memos and an interview guides conducted with the key informants were instruments of data collection. Interview was conducted and transcribed. And then both interview results and researcher's memo of personal experience were coded openly and shared experiences or strategies were identified.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis involved bracketing and the identification of notional lived experiences as related to Intention, Intuition, Evidence, and Empathy. The key informants and the researcher's live experience was coded and analyzed qualitatively.

# 3. Results and Discussion

The following strategies used to learn English as a foreign language were based on both key informants and the researcher's lived experiences, which shared together, of learning English at different levels.

## 3.1. Family Support

Among the strategies students used to learn English as a foreign language is enquiring the family support. Educated families help their children in different various ways. From the very beginning when they are at home that means at the pre-school age they can let their children to count English alphabets.

Researcher's personal experience showed that the intervention of family support in a very beginning stage is worthwhile. Actually I have started learning English at pre-school, which means at home. When I say at home, it was my father who helped me (KII-3). Similarly, the researcher's personal experience regarding family support replied as: Being at elementary school, I remember, it was my sister

who were four grade levels ahead of me that helped me too much to become clever at all subjects, especially at English language.

## 3.2. Practice

Language learning is both science and art. When we learn language, we learn for knowledge, skills and experience. These all need a practice. Among the language learning strategies learners used, practice plays a great role in learning of English as a foreign language. In all divisions of language learning strategies- learning, communication and social, practice is something which comes at a center. Cognitive, metacognitive, communication and social strategies used are based on the frequent practice the learner made. I used to practice reading passages turn by turn. And dialogue with my classmates (KII-2).

From this key informant point we understand that practice includes all the language skills.

The research showed that teachers are very important to make students practice the second/foreign language.

*"I really appreciate Mr. AsratDebebe because he was the one who encouraged me to speak in the class and support all students. He encouraged us to have positive attitude towards English language. Even outside of school, I read different books and materials." (KII-2)*

*"I never forget the inspiration I got from my classroom environment and conversation with my friends. I think that inspired me to choose and specialize in English language at university level." (KII-3)*

*"My English teacher used to call me by my name and encourage me to read in front of class. He used to ask students to clap hands for anyone student doing and saying something 'good' in English. It was all encouragement and used to give us some good fatherly advices." (KII-4)*

Similarly, one of my informants states:

*"He (teacher) used to make us tell stories in the classroom. He even prepared short dramas and dialogues for us to perform in the classroom. We loved those sessions as they used to make us feel important and capable. He told us not to worry about our grammar; all he expected from us was our courage and commitment... Suddenly, I found myself participating in mini media and drama clubs. At the end of every month, for instance, we used to perform English dramas to the school community, with all the students and teachers in attendance. To keep learning and improving my English, thus, became a matter of maintaining my status as an 'actor in English' among my friends." (KII-1)*

On the other hand teachers who are accuracy oriented who like to criticize and expect a lot from students were described as inhibitors in language learning. The teachers who focus on grammar rules and accuracy were described as discouraging.

## 3.3. Translation Method

Using translation method is a common form of strategy most students used in learning English as a foreign language

I can say. It was my lived experience that I had been using translation method starting from primary schools. I have been using this method in different ways. In one hand, I used in-translation. When I say in-translation, I take a word from mother tongue and look dictionary to find English equivalent term. In other hand, I used out-translation using a dictionary and find Afan Oromo meaning for certain English words. In connection to this, my key informant replied: *I used to learn some tenses and vocabularies using a kind of translation. Amharic to English dictionary helped me to learn vocabularies there (KII-1).*

The first language experience is the basis of second or foreign language learning. As a result, the desire/intentionality is established- consciousness of language learning is in place.

The desire is thus to learn to communicate in the second/foreign language—translation becomes a key route in the learning of words, combination of words—learners get engaged in bracketing of experiences in the process of developing their vocabulary.

The key informants put their experiences as follows:

*"I was studying words by listing them in my vocabulary exercise book with their Amharic translations in front of each word." (KII-4)*

*"I used to write the name of anything that I got on my way home and ask my teachers to tell me the name of those things in English. This strategy was very much effective for me to learn vocabulary." (KII-5)*

In addition to the basic four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing, translation method can also help to learn grammar.

The learning of grammar in the context of communicative actions enhanced language learning. The contexts of communication action involved speaking, listening, reading and writing. This required them to develop the ability of bracketing of the type of experiences they had with the grammar of their first language. The grammatical positioning of lexical forms in the process of expressing communicative actions demanded more input and exposure to English through speaking, listening, reading and writing. It looks that grammar learning also develops as more lived experiences are gained. The explicit grammar teaching was described to some extent helpful if connected with communication actions.

### 3.4. Memorization

Memorization strategy is a kind of strategy where students used imagery and sounds of things, for example, to save information in long-term memory and then retrieving it from there when necessary. Memorization is cognitive learning strategies that contribute directly to the language learning. Similarly, Rubin [6] identified *memorization, monitoring, practice, deductive reasoning, clarification/verification, and guessing/inductive inferencing as cognitive learning strategies that contribute directly to language learning. (I used to memorize certain part of dialogue in grade 10. And certain dialogue was given to us to practice at home for a week- KII-2).*

### 3.5. Experience Sharing

The data shows that the tangibility of experience is central in the development of experiences and engaging in the process of learning through bracketing.

*"I listen frequently to different media which broadcast programs in English and this has helped me to communicate in English." (KII-5)*

*"I speak in English with friends and foreign English speakers. This helped me to improve my English...I watched English films to entertain myself and it helped me to improve my English language (KII-4).*

As a language learning strategies key informants were using experience sharing. Experience could be shared from classmates, family, native speakers, and from anyone who knows the language more. (My father was taught by British and Indian teachers at that time beginning from grade 3 to grade 9, he was used to tell me his experiences how he was taught by these people-KII-1).

I was also used to speak with my brother who was an English teacher at that time i.e. when I was at lower grades. He used to encourage me to speak for fluency. Fluency indicates 'The processing of language in real time' [15] in which learners are able to carry out meaningful communication easily and naturally in a steady speed without unnecessary pauses within their speech. There are various factors that encourage or discourage our fluency. According to Dornyei [3] and Ellis [4], fluency depends on individual differences, individual intelligence and motivation, learning styles, learner beliefs and strategies. Thus, to develop ones fluency in English, students need to share experiences of speaking with speakers of the language at lower grades and work on the challenges to fluency.

### 3.6. Readings

Readings of short stories, critical reading, library reading, and comprehension reading are some forms of reading strategies used to learn English as a foreign language. *(Teacher devoted his time on reading passages and he helped us to do everything accordingly just to read critically and the purpose of reading and he helped us to extract the meaning from the passage interpretation-KII-3). Similarly, another key informant replied: (Sometimes we used to read passages turn by turn in front of the class. So, I used to learn reading in such way- KII-2).*

Reading in the first language is about object intuition. The same way they intuit objects in their first tongue, they will intuit the objects in second/foreign language too.

The data shows that learners of English use the intuiting of objects in their first language when it comes to intuiting of objects in English – as their school life experience widens their ability to intuit objects in the school environment increases. One of my informants stated:

*"When I was grade five, my teacher gave me news paper to read a story published in the paper. I spent the whole night reading the story. In the following day, I told him the whole story in Afan Oromo and he gave me a pen. I felt*

*happy and I continued reading news papers particularly stories. This has helped me develop my reading and writing skills because I was writing summaries of the stories that I read from the news papers.” (KII-3)*

To learn foreign language, children can take practice of reading different sources. Regarding this strategy, one of my informant states:

*“Biology, history and geography subjects were especially important to me learn the language more than English subject itself. Because these subjects exposed me to reading long texts and understand main ideas. (KII-2)*

Hence, teachers and family should support their children to keep in touch with reading of different sources written in English to develop/learn second/foreign language.

## 4. Research Findings

Based on the study conducted to explore language learning strategies non-native speakers used to learn EFL/ESL, these findings were identified: family support was identified as a strategy of language learning because educated families help their children in different various ways. From the very beginning when they are at home that means at the pre-school age they can let their children to count English alphabets. In another way, foreign language learners use practice as a best form of strategy of language learning because in all divisions of language learning strategies-learning, communication and social, practice is something which comes at a center. Cognitive, metacognitive, communication and social strategies used are based on the frequent practice learners made.

Translation methods and memorization were also identified as a language learning strategies learners of EFL/ESL used. As one of my key informants stated students learn some tenses and vocabularies using a kind of translation which is for example, Amharic to English dictionary. And memorization strategy is a kind of strategy where students used imagery and sounds of things, for example, to save information in long-term memory and then retrieving it from there when necessary.

The research also showed that first language learning is a facilitator for the second/foreign language learning rather than being hindrance.

Finally, experience sharing and readings were identified as strategies my key informants used in learning English as a foreign language. As my experience and informants lived experience, sharing experiences from someone who knows the language more and readings of different issues such as short stories, books, references, comprehensions were some of the strategies we have been using in learning English language as a foreign language.

Finally, bracketing is reflected as the best strategy of learning a language. The data showed that bracketing has been an important process in language learning. The reflections showed how changes in strategies happened in the process of learning English.

*“I now understand that learning language is a lifetime*

*practice and activity. I always use any opportunity and source to learn the language in particular and any subject in general. My dream is to be knowledgeable, skillful, researcher, writer, outstanding teacher, and critical thinker. I want to be a kind of person who always has confidence in what he is doing.” (KII-4)*

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on this phenomenological study, the following conclusion and recommendation were made.

### 5.1. Conclusions

Learning strategies are defined as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task used by students to enhance their own learning” [14].

- 1) Second/foreign language learning is essentially based on the experience a child has accumulated in his/her first language. The denial of this fact would inhibit or slow down learning of the target language. The child has successfully learned and experienced learning its first language.
- 2) The child has learned to bracket experiences in the process of developing its lived experience and expressing such an experience in its first language. Thus, when learning a second/foreign language, the child does not need to start afresh. It is evidential that the learning of a second/foreign language needs to be based on the experience of the first language.
- 3) The desire and necessity to learn to communicate in the first language or second language remains the same. While the communicative values of all languages remain the same, the intensity and complexity however are different depending on the level of knowledge, skills, abilities, objects, realities intended to be intuited and experienced.
- 4) The lived experience in second/foreign language learning implies languages that have been used at the level of literary level give learners better experience in their intentions, intuitions, and ability to empathy and inter subjectivity and life world especially when it comes to reading and writing. This implies that the development of local languages would make the learning of English much simpler. It is a facilitator not a hindrance.
- 5) To tackle the difficulties faced in learning of English as a foreign language, the study was identified family support, practice, translation method, memorization, experience sharing and readings as learning strategies students frequently used to learn English as a FL or SL.

### 5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions made, the study forwarded the following recommendations:

- 1) There should be motivation or encouragement from teachers that students can develop their learning based on their preference of strategies.
- 2) Government should give attention to teaching profession to tackle the problem faced in the field.
- 3) There should be teachers training to fill the gap between theory and practice.
- 4) Teachers should do lot particularly English teachers to improve language learning.
- 5) Children should take the same strategies of their first language learning when they learn second/foreign languages.

## Appendix: Interview Guide

- 1) What would you tell me about your experiences of learning English at elementary and secondary levels of schooling?  
Probing:
  - a. What strategies you have been using to learn English easily?
  - b. Are there some positive phenomenons or practices you have never forgotten?
  - c. Were there negative experiences in these all years?
- 2) Is the first language learning strategies facilitator or hindrance to second/foreign language learning? How?
- 3) What you recommend to overcome challenges of teaching and learning at these levels?

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