

Cognitive Learning Strategies instruction and listening proficiency development in foreign languages undergraduates.

Diana Katherine González, Estefanya Cataño Franco, Mónica López Medina

Abstract—the following paper reports the results of a mixed study on Language Learning Strategies instruction. The work sought to investigate the effect of cognitive learning strategies instruction on the development of the listening ability of English as a Foreign Language. The selected population were first year students from the Bachelor's Degree program on Foreign Languages from a Colombian University. Initially, a diagnostic test was administered with the purpose of establishing the current students' listening level. Likewise, Students answered and extract from the SILL Questionnaire (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) to measure their cognitive strategies use. Subsequently, a series of implementations based on the cognitive strategies instruction to develop listening skill in EFL through authentic material were carried out. The data was collected by using quantitative and qualitative instruments. Such as focus group, field diary and rubrics to evaluate listening performance. The initial results showed students did not use Learning Strategies effectively as they reportedly argued on the SILL answers. Besides, they presented low levels of listening proficiency. After the implementation; students demonstrated a more controlled and monitored use of their cognitive learning strategies which significantly influenced their listening ability development.

Keywords— Cognitive Learning strategies – Learning Strategies Instruction- Listening proficiency– EFL-

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I. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language, is a latent need in technological, academic, cultural and social process where the understanding of a second language is often a synonym of development. Colombian university students are well exposed to environments where learning English is required, precisely for the country's current economic and scientific growth, as well as the intercultural changes Colombia is facing. For this reason, the Colombian Ministry of Education created the

¹ Diana Katherine Gonzalez O. is a full time Professor in the Bachelor's Degree of Foreign Languages program at Unidad Central del Valle del Cauca University in Tuluá, Colombia. She is a member of the Applied Linguistics Research Group at UCEVA University and currently coordinates the research line: Individual Learning processes in Foreign Language Acquisition. She is a master's candidate in TESOL from Universidad Internacional Iberoamericana at Puerto Rico.

Estefanya Cataño Franco and Mónica López Medina graduated from the Bachelor's Degree of Foreign Languages Program in 2018. They are English teachers and also work as co-researchers in the bachelor's degree program at Uceva University. The line research is directed by the Professor Diana Katherine Gonzalez O, at UCEVA University.

bilingualism policy named: *Bilingual Colombia* which aims to become Colombian students bilingual according to the CEF levels through different programs such as the reinforcement of the English subject in the curriculums, immersion programs with English native speakers and education for teachers. The fundamental aim is to educate teachers and students in all the levels of education, capable of defending itself in the new bilingual environment that one presents in the commonness. [1]

Consequently, the learning process of foreign languages generates important reflections around its implications. Learning should lead to autonomy, critical and reflective thinking of the learning process and the possibilities to find ways to learn better. In the context of UCEVA University, two important points jump at sight. The first one refers to the learning of the foreign languages and the second one to the skills developed when a new language is learned. In that sense, it is important to emphasize that the university is considered to be a space of formation, interaction and academic feedback, where three agents intervene: teacher, student and methodology. Therefore, it could be assumed the university is the place where students not only learn new contents but they learn how to learn.

In this respect, the processes of education that the students receive initially must answer to the need of discovering knowledge and use it effectively in professional and academic settings. In the same way, it departs from the assumption that university education students receive, must devote to teach them to become actors and executors of their learning, action that could be reflected in autonomous and critical learning processes where the students show independence and managing how to learn and monitor what was learned.

Additionally, learning a foreign language implies fully skills development, which means students must become efficient in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The last one is precisely the skill this researched was focused on, precisely because of the students need to comprehend what is said in order to produce utterances which reflect their emotions, feelings opinions and knowledge.

The presence of studies and research that account for the use of learning strategies in relation to the acquisition of a foreign language goes back to the sixties. However, in the XXI century

its implementation entails a series of challenges for teachers and learners, since these mechanisms suppose an individuality when applied, seeing that each individual handles a different way of acquiring their knowledge. Precisely this concept is defined by Rebeca Oxford who suggests language learning strategies are “specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing their foreign language skills” [2]. Teachers can find difficult to cope and develop accurate teaching strategies which aim to deal with the students’ individual differences in learning. Hence, the importance of developing proposals where language learning strategies instruction (LLSI) is part of the curricular structure of English programs. Considering language learning instruction could enhance the way in which information is stored, structured and retrieved, generating more effective learning processes.

Furthermore, in the higher education field, these mechanisms present great opportunities for teachers and students specially, since learning strategies foster the autonomy, placing the students as creator in their own learning process. The diversity coming from the learning strategies taxonomy gives an opportunity to explore possibilities to improve language instruction, based upon the students’ learning needs. This leads to the use of *Cognitive Strategies* for the study development, since the cognitive structure of higher education students allows the possibility to implement instruction where this strategies can be taught. Besides, the students initial testing to verify English level showed the ability which provided the lower levels was listening. Establishing the relationship between LLS and the English listening ability development it was observed the cognitive processes involved in listening can be easily related to the use of and description of their cognitive learning strategies.

Considering the aforementioned, this research focused on the effectiveness of an evaluation program instruction based on the cognitive learning strategies instruction to develop the English listening skill in first year students of the bachelor’s degree program on foreign languages in a Colombian university.

In this context, it becomes necessary to analyze to what extent, the implementation of an instruction program based on the use of cognitive learning strategies influences the English listening ability development on first year students of the BA program on foreign languages. The question proposed in the research was: What is the effect of a program based on the instruction of on the use of the cognitive learning strategies with regard to the English listening skill on first year students of the BA program on foreign languages.

This paper shows the results of the mixed study conducted at the university. Initially, a theoretical framework highlighting relevant literature related to the stated problem. Thus, topics such as learning strategies, concept, implications and discussion were addressed. Also, major themes as listening ability, and competence were also referenced. Afterwards, a description of the mixed study was made by explaining the

elements, approach and instruments that contributed the resolution of the research questions. Furthermore, data analysis of the research process was made and finally a discussion of the main implications of strategy instruction listening fostering were made in the light of the conclusions offered in the study.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Language is a complex system that the human being has used throughout history with the main purpose of communicating. Ussa affirms that in “the learning and acquisition of the foreign language a set of different elements influence, which include, of course, those already been developed with the acquisition of the mother tongue, such as the construction of thought logical, the development of imagination and creativity; This learning helps restructure thinking and contributes to the creation of communication links with the sociocultural environment of the new languages (...)”[3] During the learning process, learners progressively are required to construct and reconstruct concepts, make parallels, categorize information, establishing relationships to later use them to communicate ideas and thoughts. The teaching-learning of foreign languages require the existence of different spaces for social interaction, which allow, through the strategies used by each student, the mutual decoding of messages.

A. Competence

Chomsky was the first one in using the term communicative competence. He managed to establish distinction between competence and performance. The first refers to the knowledge that the speaker - listener has of the language. performance refers to the royal use of the language in specific situations where knowledge can be explicit through communicative acts.[4] For Chomsky, on one hand, competence is an innate faculty of human beings was equivalent to a grammatical competence focused in linguistic rules that could generate grammatically correct phrases. Performance, on the other hand, is related to the putting in use of the above mentioned phrases in the speech.

In agreement with the proposed for Chomsky, Canale and Swain define the grammatical competence of the model that they propose, nevertheless, they emphasize in the skill and performance of a person in a merely communicative act, which implies dynamism and a process of adaptability of the linguistic part. In the same way Hymes defines the communicative competence as the most general term for the communicative capacity of a person, which includes both the knowledge of the language and the skill to use it.[5] That is to say, the author considers the most social communicative competence of a way, involving the linguistics with sociocultural processes. Briefly, the above mentioned position suggests that the nature of the communicative competition should be interpersonal and relative defined merely from the context in the one that meets immersed. Departing from the communicative competition as a skill.

B. Listening Ability

In a recount of the theories of Lyle Bachman & Adrian Palmer [6] & Jiménez [7] who propose a broader taxonomy in communicative competence, where the terms reception processes and skills and abilities acquire relevance, this research project focuses on listening ability due to the problems of the specific context in which the present work is carried out.

The ability to listen focuses on the understanding of spoken language, which is why it is an essential skill, because it is present in most activities that take place in everyday life.

“We hear a variety of things, for example; what someone says during a conversation, face to face or on the phone; announcements giving information, for example, at an airport or railway station; the weather forecast, a song on the radio, music, listening to someone else's conversation, reading, professional advice. (...) instructions, machinery, directions and a dialogue recorded in class” [8]

For the aforementioned, listening ability is shown as one of the fundamental skills in language learning. Richards & Richard [9] They describe listening as the process of understanding speech in a first or second language and as the study of auditory comprehension processes in second language learning which focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (eg, phonemes, words, grammatical structures), as well as the role of the listener's expectations, situation and context. Likewise, the listening is divided into 3 categories according to Richards & Richard [10] which are Listening for Details, which is to understand the specific information located in a text. Listening for Gist, which is to understand the general meaning of a text paying attention to the specific details and finally, listening for Strategy, which is based on dealing with the incoming speech.

It is practically impossible to have a single definition of what listening or listening is, since the approaches and paradigms with respect to this ability are changing according to the needs of the people. The ability of listening has a higher level of importance, as much or even more importance than oral skills, since:

“The one does not work without the other, since to speak for the fact of speaking, does not constitute greater merit if what we say is not received by another person. In this sense, listening becomes a fundamental social component for practically every human being, except perhaps for people who do not have a sense of hearing” [11]

Likewise, this ability is of great importance since humans spend the most time of our lives listening. Brown & Yule [12] Mention that the most effective method of learning is listening to a certain degree of schooling and that approximately 60% of a student's education time is spent listening. This is why the ability of listening obtains a fundamental role in the life of an apprentice, since without this his learning and knowledge

acquisition process would be incomplete and he would not develop the competences necessary for his training.

C. Learning Strategies

In order to collect information about research, conceptions, taxonomies that account for learning strategies, it was found that learning strategies have been the object of study since the 1960s. In 1966 Aaron Carter, led the first approach between learning strategies and learning a foreign language. Information collected in the inference method in foreign language study. [13] Among the authors who have been interested in defining learning strategies O'Malley & Chamot will be highlighted. Both define learning strategies as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them appropriate, learn or retain new information" [14]

Furthermore, Oxford cited by Rodriguez Ruiz & García-Merás Garcia [15] define that learning strategies in a language are "specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in the development of their foreign language skills." And she adds "these strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval or use of the new language. Strategies are necessary tools for the development of communication skill" Oxford R. [16]

In that sense, Oxford divides her taxonomy into different types of strategies, thus allowing a range of possibilities so students know what kind of strategies to use and most importantly, how to use them. These strategies are:

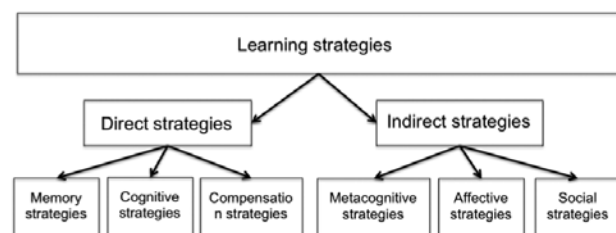


Fig 1. Classification of language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know [17]

The direct learning strategies constituted by the cognitive strategies: cognitive, memorization and compensation. These are oriented to contribute learning of the language directly by means of a mental processing of information. In addition they can be used for the development of the communicative competence and its four skills. Whereas the indirect learning strategies constituted by metacognitive, social and affective. They provide an indirect support to learning, do not involve directly to the foreign language that is studied, nevertheless, they help to support and control the learning of a foreign language.

Nevertheless, the learning strategies cannot be defined of an alone way, for it Monereo, Castelló, Mercè, Montserrat, and Maria define them as a support to the student for the learning

which is given of significant and independent form facilitating the acquisition of knowledge of the different contents since these are necessary and useful for effective learning. [18] Also ' they are a great help for the conservation of information and his application in the daily life ' Weinstein and Mayer [19]

D. Cognitive Learning Strategies

The cognitive strategies are those who allow the student to understand, to operate and to create and organize new information but always in a significant way. These strategies strengthen the production and allow, by means of the linguistic methods the skills development, since they it are communicative and expressive.



Language Learning and Teaching – Cognitive Strategies. Oxford, 1990 [20]

Learning strategies have demonstrated on several occasions that the acquisition of knowledge is neither difficult nor impossible, since there are mechanisms such as in this case which the strategies are, what allows learning to become more accessible and easier. In this specific case, learning a second language (L2) is a clear example, since it is necessary to handle certain types of guidelines to achieve effective learning. Not only that, but also the positive side effects that can bring the use of this type of methods, since they return to the entity of the educational process, in this case the student the author of his own knowledge and autonomous in the learning of this one.

Regarding this research study, learning strategies of a cognitive nature become relevant since the subcategories and aspects that it brings about are related to the skill worked which is the listening. For listening to be processed effectively, it is necessary to develop certain conditions such as cognitive affective and behavioral. [21] These conditions can be developed through the cognitive strategy which is why both variables, learning strategies of cognitive character and the ability of listening, can be worked together.

E. Learning Strategies Instruction

Bearing in mind that the students must be encouraged to develop a digest of strategies and to learn to implement them in an effective way, what does suppose that the teacher must do exactly to promote this? Learning strategies researchers

have developed a series of theoretical, such frames as the following ones:

Firstly, the common agreement among theoreticians such as Kramarski, Desoete, Bannert, Narciss, & Perry [22] relies on the statement students should be trained in order to become self-regulated, thus teachers are required to give constant instruction in their classes. Strategies instruction can be done mainly implicit and explicitly. On one hand, Implicit strategy teaching encompasses teacher proposals or actions that are supposed to enhance the use of a learning strategy in students, but that do neither involve students direct instruction or strategies to teach the use of them. On the other hand, during the explicit strategy instruction the teachers directly advises the students how to approach to the strategy use and what texts should they be used. [23]. In relation to the instruction method, some teachers prefer the strategy instruction implicitly. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests students get benefits from instruction in their explicit curriculum resulting in better students' performances. [24].

has been found that strategy instruction is necessary and beneficial for students, and also, there is a variety of materials the market to facilitate the work of the teacher in this area. Nevertheless, until the teachers should be fully conscious of nature and the use of the learning strategies, they will not be able to help students effectively.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research study presents a mixed methodology. The goal of mixed research is not to replace quantitative research or qualitative research, but rather, to use the strengths of both inquiry types combining them and trying to minimize their potential weaknesses" [25]

The quantitative approach showed the progression or non-progression in the listening ability (dependent variable) from the use of cognitive strategies (independent variable) as well as the interpretation of the SILL questionnaire. However, qualitative aspects were also required in order to evaluate the students' use of strategies in context. For that, it was necessary to consider qualitative analysis categories which were: use of strategies, hierarchy of use. All this from the perspective of the subjects involved in the research study.

The research designed chosen finally offered a triangulation of the quantitative aspects from the SILL as well as the qualitative instruments such as the field diary, the observation rubrics and the focus group.

The project was developed during three stages. The first phase corresponded pre-test had two objectives, the first was to diagnose the level of listening that students presented, the second objective was established the frequency of use of cognitive strategies by the first semester students of a Bachelor of Foreign Languages with Emphasis in English belonging to Unidad Central del Valle del Cauca. This process was done thanks to a listening test, taking questions from the KET which

was developed by Cambridge, at the same time, the cognitive strategies used by the students were identified according to the questionnaire prepared by Rebecca Oxford. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

In the second stage or phase of implementation, a series of interventions was developed through a program of activities that promoted the knowledge, understanding, and use of cognitive learning strategies with respect to exercises that implied the ability to listen, a process carried out during 8 sessions, on the other hand, this phase also counted with 3 focus group sections were carried out, where the students described their perceptions regarding the use of these strategies, their incidence in the skill taking into account categories such as use, frequency, and hierarchy.

In the third moment, a post-test was carried out by applying a new copy of the part corresponding to the listening ability of the KET, to the population of the sample, as well as the SILL questionnaire made by Rebecca Oxford, this was done in order to contrast the initial results and thus check if there was an advance in the ability to listen, through the use of cognitive strategies of learning, besides knowing the frequency of use of cognitive strategies and establish if any of them was widely used more than others

A. Sample

The sample was chosen based on a non-probabilistic sampling method with a convenience criteria. In this particular case, the first semester students shared certain features related to willingness, time availability and the lack of exposure to English instruction at a college level. From the 33 total population, 15 students were selected to participate

This sample population was composed by eight (8) women and seven (7) men with ages ranging between 18 and 32 years old.

B. Instruments

KET is an exam done by Cambridge English Language Assessment, which is constituted by three parts in which the four skills of communicative competence are evaluated. However, this research wanted to determine the progression of the listening ability, therefore only part number two of the test was taken. The listening test consists of 5 parts for a total of 25 questions pertaining to 25% of the general test result; where the student should be able to find key information, listen and write correctly the information.

On the other hand, the Strategy Inventory Language Learning tool created by Rebecca Oxford, in its version 7.0 is designed for people who use English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), this instrument is a tool that consists of 50 items on the Likert scale, in this way, people can evaluate the learning strategies they use to learn a foreign language and reveal the frequency of their use. For the

purpose of the research, it was not necessary to apply the instrument to the entire instrument, so it was adapted to the needs of the research study by taking only the part corresponding to cognitive strategies (part b).

Finally, this research study had two more instruments. The first was a bank of questions with which 3 sections of the focus group were made, in order to know the perceptions of the students about the use of cognitive strategies from the 3 categories of analysis mentioned above.

On the other hand, the overall listening comprehension is a rubric which qualify the performance of the students against the cognitive strategies' program of activities focused on the listening skill, this rubric was created by the department of education of Oregon, in it the person is classified according to the performance he has doing activities on a scale of 1 to 5 being the 1 beginning speaker and 5 a proficient speaker.

IV. RESULTS

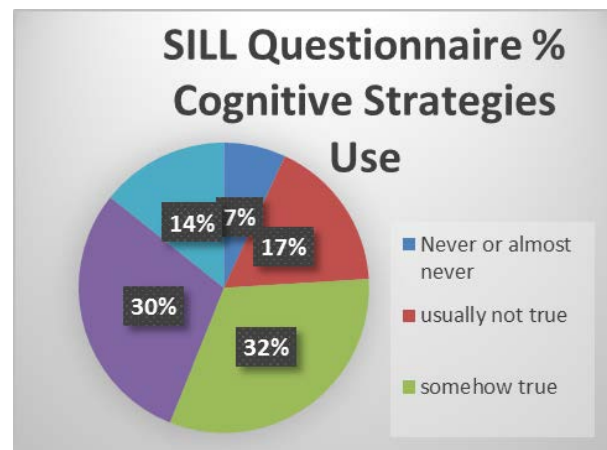


Fig 3. SILL Cognitive Strategies Results.

The results obtained in the initial phase for the SILL showed students strongly used the cognitive strategies in their English classes. Students then marked mostly the options 4 y 5, and as a result, the 32% of the total population described somehow the strategies were used. The results point out that in an initial state of the research, students' strategies might be used frequently and consciously. Cognitive strategies have played an important role in the learning process of a foreign language in this case English. "It is not the same to use tools without knowing how and why they are used, to know their purpose, function and what they are for"[26].

A. KET listening pre -test results.

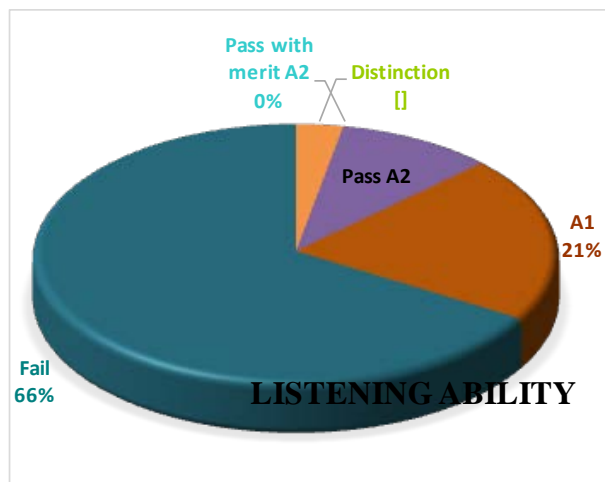


Fig 4. KET Pretest.

The KET (Key English Test) was applied, which established the English initial level related to the listening ability in the sample population. The analysis of this initial test, (pre-test), gave worrying results, since most of the sample was located at the lower level of the Cambridge scale, evidencing a low level of proficiency in that skill. The results showed students were not able to follow simple instructions in English. Besides, they could not recognize key elements in a heard text or make inferences about personal information, descriptions and routines.

The results indicated the need of implementing the instruction plan to develop cognitive learning strategies in the population.

V. IMPLEMENTATION

After the initial results, a set of lesson plans were implemented with the purpose of developing listening skills through the cognitive learning strategies instruction. The following graphs show the use of cognitive strategies along the implementation process.

A. Focus Group Results

In the second phase, a series of 8 interventions were carried out, which evidenced a progression in listening ability. However, these results fluctuated depending on the sub-strategies and aspects employed, thanks to the data obtained from the focus groups carried out, it was possible to identify this was due to factors such as the student's learning style, proficiency level and kind of activities. Gomez Sanabria pointed out "It is common to find less successful people or apprentices who use strategies as frequently as their successful partners, but who use them differently". [27] In other words, a successful and unsuccessful students may be using the same strategies, the great difference between them is the first knows how to use them properly and the second does not, hence it is important not only the knowledge of the strategies, but also an

effective instruction about them and a conscious management by the student.

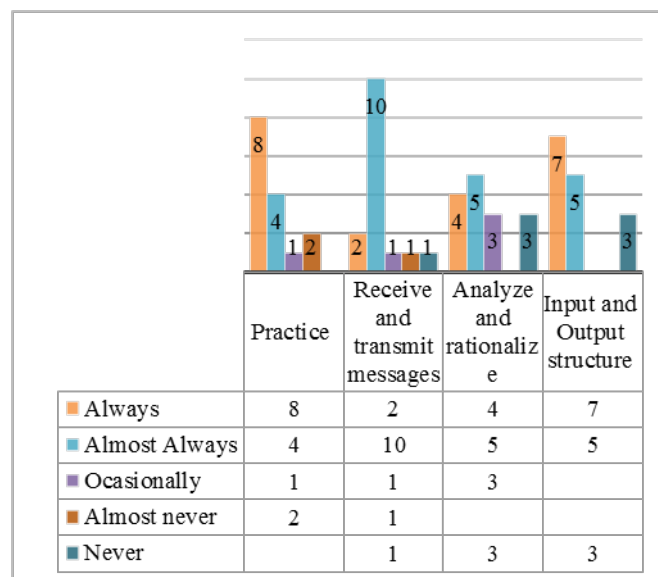


Fig 5. Cognitive Learning strategies frequency chart.

The following graph shows the cognitive strategies use reported by students in the third focus group. As it can be observed, practice was reportedly used in the category always by the majority of the population. Regarding to receive and transmit, ten students reported it was almost always. The strategies analyse and input and output structure had three students who reported they were never used. The students affirmed to use the cognitive strategies frequently. That is to say, they reaffirmed the position already exposed in the previous focus group, which led to the conclusion some sub-strategies were easily more applicable than others in agreement to the leaning context involved. The factors affecting the use of strategies to develop listening skills according to students where: time, the type of exercise, and specially the understanding and conceptualization about what is the strategy used for.

It is necessary to highlight the students reported the cognitive strategies where a set of functional tools. Nevertheless, the classification and use of the strategies is tied to the students learning styles and the exercise cognitive purpose. One student suggested "she does not seem to care certain strategies because she is more visual, I am more auditory instead" a Students said the strategies are flexible. Which means the strategies are not necessary to be used in its entirety and strongly depends on the learning path the students decide for a particular learning context. One of the students argued: "Repeating significantly is very effective, although in many situations where you are face to face with a native speaker you might not be able to put into practice because it is complicated to ask someone to repeat a phrase five times" [28]

VI. POST TEST RESULTS

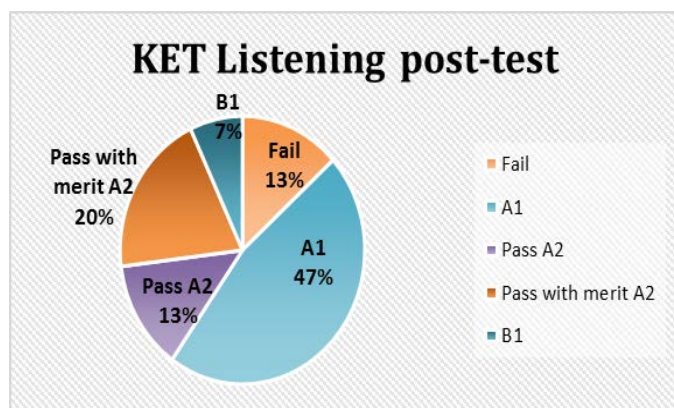


Fig 6. KET post test results.

The previous graph shows the KET exam post-test results applied to the population sample. It can be observed 47 % which is equivalent to 7 people, were in A1 level according to the Cambridge scale. Furthermore, 20% of the population that is to say 3 people, were located in the level A2 pass with merit, which suggests they are on an intermediate level. Additionally 2 people represented by 13 %, placed in the level A2. Other 2 people also represented by the percentage mentioned above were positioned in the lowest level of Cambridge scale, fail. Finally, 7% of the population, 1 person settled herself in the last level of the scale, B1.

The post-test results show a great improvement regarding pass with merit level which was non-existent in the pre-test. The post.-test demonstrates 20% of students located in this level. Finally the result of the level B1 was kept uniform with regard to the obtained in the pre-test

The final results demonstrate that there was progression from Fail up to the level A2 Pass with merit. Accordingly, it can be deduced the implementation of a program based on the cognitive learning strategies strengthens or develops the listening skill which indirectly contributes the students' communicative competence as means of the initial comprehension processes of generate production.

VII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

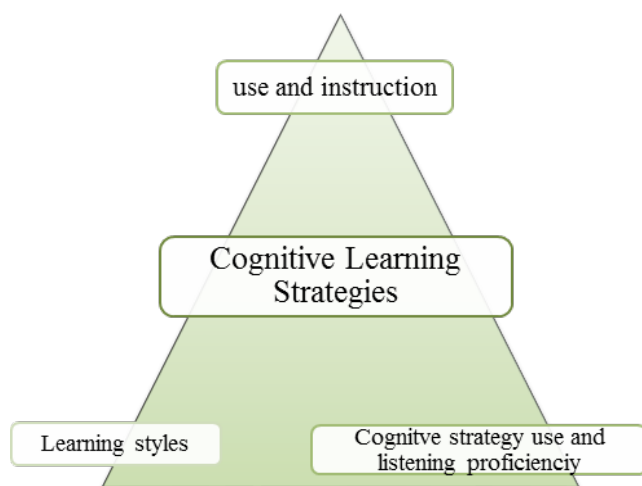


Fig 7. Triangulation of results.

The previous triangulation graph demonstrates the relation of cognitive learning strategies had with the results obtained in each of the instruments of the program implemented. The cognitive learning strategies are in the triangle centre which indicates the research purpose. The instruments used of this study (field diary, focus group, Key proficiency test, rubrics to evaluate listening) led to the conclusion the use of cognitive learning strategies depend on the following factors: Learning styles, use and instruction and proficiency.

These results are identical to studies mentioned by Chamot, Chamot and El-Dinary Khaldieh and Vandergrift c since these investigations conclude it is common to think less successful learners use strategies as frequently as their successful classmates but that use them in differently [29] .

In consequence to the previous it is important to highlight the need the implementation of specific learning strategies has in the bachelor's degree on foreign languages curriculum, bearing in mind what Purple claims about the impact of the frequent use of cognitive strategies in relation to a good foreign language performance.

Likewise, the success of program about learning strategies instruction was planned considering Paris's proposal strategies must be functional and significant. [30] Instruction must demonstrate what strategies can be used, how they can be applied and when and for what sound useful. Students must think that the strategies are useful and necessary . There must be a connection between the taught strategy and the perceptions of the student on the context of the task

An effective and successfully learning strategies instruction program generates confidence and enhances students' self-efficiency. The instruction must be direct, informative and explanatory. The responsibility to generate, to devote and to control effective strategies is transferred from the instructor to the student. The materials of instruction must be clear, practical and agreeable. The aforementioned can be concluded after having checked the results obtained of this research where it was shown strategies instruction produced significant advancement in the development listening skills.

As it was previously mentioned successful and not successful students might use the same strategies. Nevertheless, the results showed the great difference relies on how appropriately they are being used, what purposes they are being used for, the type of drill and the student's learning styles. This study demonstrates strategy knowledge and instruction are equally important at the moment of use them with leaning purposes. An effective instruction on learning strategies brings a conscious use by students.

In conclusion, Cohen. O'Malley and Chamot [31] argue that learning strategies, can help students to improve his own perception, reception, storage, and retention and language information recovery. The learning strategies help the performance of language tasks, they promote permanent

evaluation and analysis to find the meaning of a word or expression. On the other hand, O'Malley and Chamot affirm that a strategy is useful, as long as three fundamental conditions are fulfilled:

1. The strategy used must be related to the language task to be accomplished.
2. To use strategies effectively and link other relevant strategies to determine certain task.
3. The strategy must be tied in to the student's learning style.

[32] In this respect, this research identified students conducted different processes while using cognitive learning strategies. For example, the students who presented highest listening proficiency levels had empathy with specific aspects of every sub-strategy of the cognitive strategy. On the contrary, low proficient students, barely reported the cognitive strategies use. As a consequence, it was observed they did not use strategies correctly.

Due to the progress demonstrated by the population sample in each of the interventions, it was possible to establish a correlation between the cognitive learning strategies and the listening skill progression. Concluding, the cognitive strategies influence in the listening skill development.

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Diana Katherine Gonzalez O. Is a full time Professor in the Bachelor's Degree of Foreign Languages program at Unidad Central del Valle del Cauca University in Tuluá, Colombia. She is a member of the Applied Linguistics Research Group at UCEVA University and currently coordinates the research line: Individual Learning processes in Foreign Language Acquisition. She is a master's candidate in TESOL from Universidad Internacional Iberoamericana at Puerto Rico.

Estefanya Cataño Franco and Mónica López Medina graduated from the Bachelor's Degree of Foreign Languages Program in 2018. They are English teachers and also work as co-researchers in the bachelor's degree program at Uceva University. Their research works focus on the Individual Learning processes in Foreign Language Acquisition. The line research is directed by the Professor Diana Katherine Gonzalez O, at UCEVA University.