# Saudi English Major Freshmen Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies: An Exploratory Study

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This study aims at exploring the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) employed by Saudi Freshmen students majoring in English as a foreign language (EFL). The participants are 81 Saudi male students in their first semester in the English Department and Translation in the College of Language and Translation at King Saud University. Data was collected using a questionnaire which was adapted from the study of Rabadi (2016) and was analyzed using the SPSS program. The overall results of this study show that participants use all of the different vocabulary learning strategies: Determination strategies, Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Metacognitive strategies, and Social strategies, with different degrees of frequency. By looking at the sub-categories of the strategies the results indicate that Metacognitive strategies (mean score: 1.98/4) are the most used and/or preferred strategies by all participants, followed by Social strategies (MS: 1.91), Determination strategies (MS: 1.62), Cognitive strategies (MS: 1.39) and Memory strategies (MS: 1.26) respectively. However, the overall mean score of (1.63) for the use of the strategies indicates that the participants of this study are low/poor users of vocabulary learning strategies in general.

**Key words:** Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Saudi Arabia, King Saud University, Saudi Students

## INTRODUCTION

Linguists, researchers, and language educators, all agree on the important role that language learning strategies (LLS) play in mastering target languages, both second and foreign languages. According to Oxford (1990, p. 8), learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations." Furthermore, O'Malley and Chammot (1990, p. 1) defined LLS as the "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information." More recently, Cohen and Macaro (2007) views LLS as techniques which include three factors: situation, goal, and action.

There's also a wide consensus among researchers on the effectiveness of good vocabulary mastery in successful communication and the vital role that vocabulary plays in language proficiency in all four language skills. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), as a subpart of LLS, play an important role in the mastery of vocabulary of the target language. As Schmitt (1997) noticed, the importance of strategies was motivated by the growing interest in the active role of the learner in the language learning process. Nation (2013) indicated that it is not easy to define VLS. However, he suggested that for a strategy to deserve attention from a teacher, a strategy would need to:

1. Involve a choice, that is, there are several strategies to choose from and one choice could be, not to use the strategy;

2. Be complex, that is, there are several steps to learn;
3. Require knowledge and benefit from training; and
4. Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use. (p. 326)

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Vocabulary knowledge, as mentioned above, is a cornerstone of the academic success and plays a crucial role in shaping learners' four language skills. Many EFL learners, including the Saudi students, have difficulty with vocabulary learning which is, in many cases, reflected in their poor communication, both verbally and in writing. The problem that EFL Saudi learners face is that they know that they need to increase their vocabulary stock tremendously; however, they may lack the tool and strategies that can help them to be successful vocabulary learners and consequently successful language learners in general. This study aimed to diagnose and describe the case of the Saudi English major freshmen students in terms of their vocabulary learning strategies. This in turns should inform instructors, about the strength and weaknesses of their learners and where they stand when it comes to vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs.)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature in vocabulary studies has revealed various vocabulary learning strategies taxonomies and classifications. Many

researchers have grouped strategies into different categories based on their research results (cf. Gu & Johnson, 1996, Schmitt, 1997, and Nation 2013).The taxonomy proposed by Schmitt (1997), which includes: Determination, Memory, Cognitive, Metacognitive, and Social strategies, was the most comprehensive and famous one, and consequently has been used widely in many studies for its ease of application. Furthermore, the obtained data can be easily coded and analyzed. The previous research utilized Schmitt's taxonomy to explore participants' vocabulary strategies, and in many cases, with relation to participants' level of proficiency, gender, and language background, among other factors. In the following lines, some relevant studies will be presented.

Catalan (2003) conducts a study with 581 male and female Spanish students learning Basque and English. The study aims at exploring whether there is a difference between male and female learners in the number and the range of the employed vocabulary learning strategies. The results reveal that the participants differed significantly in the number of strategies used. That is, female with higher percentages of strategies used. In this respect, the results show females' greater employment of formal rule, input elicitation, rehearsal, and planning strategies, whereas males preferred the use of image vocabulary learning strategies. However, when it comes to the range of the used strategies, 8 out of the 10 most frequently employed strategies are shared by both male and female participants.

With the impact of the proficiency level in mind, ÇELİK and TOPTAŞ's (2010) survey the vocabulary-learning strategies of 95 Turkish EFL learners enrolled in Ankara University School of Foreign Languages at three different levels (Elementary, Intermediate, and Upper levels). The results of this study show that the Determination strategies were utilized very frequently, whereas the Cognitive strategies were the least utilized one compared to other strategies. The results also show that the intermediate level learners regarded the strategy categories as more useful than the other groups. However, the authors conclude that the participants' overall use of vocabulary learning strategies is somewhat inadequate and there was a gap between their use of strategies and the perception of strategy usefulness.

Similar to Catalan (2003) Arjomand and Sharififar (2011) conducte a study with a total of 80 English freshmen (65 females and 15 males) students to explore the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies and the relationship between gender and strategy use among Iranian EFL freshman students. The results obtained from this study indicate that social strategies were the least frequently used strategies by both genders. It was found that male learners tended to use Cognitive, Determination, Memory, and Metacognitive strategies, while female learners tended to use Metacognitive, Cognitive, and Memory strategies respectively. The authors conclude that there was no significant difference between genders in the use of these strategies, with only one exception in the case of metacognitive strategies.

In similar context, Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) investigate how common is the use of vocabulary learning strategies by 74 EFL Iranian students at Hakim Sabzevary University. The results indicate that, Determination strategies are the most frequently used strategies. In contrast, Social strategies are the least frequently used ones by all participants. Cognitive, Memory and Metacognitive strategies came in between respectively. They also find that guessing from contexts and dictionary use strategies, as sub-strategies, are the most popular strategies, while asking the teacher or peers for meaning are the least frequently used strategies.

One of the recent studies in the Arabic context was carried out by Rabadi (2016) where she investigates the vocabulary learning strategies of 110 undergraduate EFL Jordanian students majoring in English Language and Literature from eight Jordanian universities. She administered a modified version of Schmitt's (1997) vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire, with a total of forty items under five main categories of vocabulary learning strategies. They include: Memory, Determination, Social, Cognitive, and Metacognitive strategies. The results reveal that Memory strategies were the most frequently used whereas Metacognitive strategies are the least frequently used ones. Rabadi concludes that her Jordanian EFL participants are medium strategy users.

Likewise, another recent study is Fatima and Pathan's study (2016). They investigate the vocabulary learning strategies employed by 180 undergraduate students in two universities in Pakistan. A 45 close-ended item questionnaire, consisting of 4 broad vocabulary learning strategies: Metacognitive regulation strategy, Cognitive regulation strategy, Memory strategy, and Activation strategies, was administered to the participants. Results indicate that Cognitive regulation strategy and Activation strategy are the most employed strategies. The authors conclude that their results revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in practicing vocabulary learning strategies between both groups from the two different universities.

The literature reviewed above show that these studies either investigated language learners' use of these strategies in general (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Rabadi, 2016; and Fatima and Pathan, 2016), or whether there is a difference between male and female participants in the use of VLSs (Catalan, 2003; Arjomand & Sharififar, 2011), and the impact of proficiency level on the use of VLSs (ÇELİK & TOPTAŞ's; 2010). Furthermore, it is evident that there is no dominant category agreed upon by all respondents even with similar context. This supports the need for more studies on VLSs in general, and in the Saudi and Arab context in particular.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

### Research Questions

The current study aimed to address the following three research questions:

1. What is the common order of the use of the five main vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) categories employed by the Saudi English major freshmen students?
2. To what category, in general, can we assign the Saudi English major freshmen students in terms of their VLS use: high, medium, or low VLS users?
3. What are the most and least individual sub-VLS employed by the Saudi English major freshmen students?

## Participants

The participants of this study were 81 Saudi male students. They were all majoring in English as a foreign language and just enrolled in their first semester in the English Department and Translation in the College of Language and Translation at King Saud University. Participation was voluntary.

## Instrument

This study utilized an adapted version of the questionnaire that was designed by Rabadi (2016) in her study with Jordanian students, which was based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies. The adaption of this questionnaire was motivated by the suitability of the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies in general and by its popularity and the wide use of it in many studies, and furthermore by its tailored design for the Jordanian students in an educational environment similar to the context of this study in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire consists of 5 main categories of vocabulary learning strategies with total of 40 sub-strategies. They included Determination strategies (DET), Memory strategies (MEM), Cognitive strategies (COG), Metacognitive strategies (MET), and Social strategies (SOC) with 8 sub-strategies under each type. A five-point scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always) was used to measure the frequency of use of the vocabulary learning strategies.

## Procedures

The questionnaire was administered to three groups of participants (total of 81) during the fourth week of the first semester. It was given at the same time in the same day by three instructors including the researcher himself. Oral instruction was given in Arabic to the participants before filling out the questionnaire. There was no time limit for the questionnaire; however, the time ranges from 17 to 35 minutes to complete the questionnaire. This study employed a five-point rating scale, ranging from never (0 point) to always (4points). Therefore, the scoring system of strategy use can be valued from 0.00 to 4.00. The overall mean score for VLSs, for VLS category, and for each strategy valued from 0.00 to 1.99 is looked at as low use of strategy, from 2.00 to 2.99 as medium use, and from 3.00 to 4.00 as high use. Data gathered from this study was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), by applying the t-test to the data to get the means and standard deviations for the use of the strategies in order to find answers to the main questions of the present study.

## FINDINGS

To answer the first question about the common order of the use of the five main vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) categories employed by the Saudi English major freshmen students, the mean scores and standard deviations for all VLSs categories were calculated as shown in Table 1 below.

As can be seen in Table 1, the mean scores of all VLSs ranged between 1.98 and 1.26. Metacognitive strategies (MS: 1.98) occupied the first rank whereas Memory strategies (MS: 1.26) occupied the fifth rank. The overall mean score of all strategy use is 1.63.

The second question of the study was: to what category, in general, can we assign the Saudi English major freshmen students in terms of their VLS use: high, medium, or low VLS users? To answer this question, the overall mean score of all VLSs categories was calculated as shown in Table 1 above. The overall mean score was 1.63. This indicates that Saudi English language major freshmen students are "Low/poor" user of VLSs with reference to the rating scale of the study tool mentioned above.

In answering the third question, the mean scores and standard deviations for all VLSs were calculated. As this question investigates in general the most and least VLSs employed by Saudi English language major freshmen students, the top ten strategies and least ten ones of the whole tool items have been extracted as seen in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 2 shows that the top ten strategies employed by the participants come from all 5 main categories of VLSs, favoring the Metacognitive and Social strategies over other types of strategies. It also shows that the mean scores of these strategies ranged between 3.09 (first) and 2.02 (tenth). Items occupying the 1st, 3rd, 9th, and 10th ranks come from the Metacognitive category; items occupying the 6th, 7th, and 8th ranks come from the Social category; Item occupying the 2nd rank comes from the Determination category; Item occupying the 4th rank comes from the Cognitive category; and Item occupying the 5th rank comes from the Memory category.

Table 3 shows that the least ten employed strategies come only from 3 main categories of VLSs: Cognitive strategies with 4 sub-strategies occupying the 40th, 38th, 36th, and 32nd, Determination strategies with 3 sub-strategies occupying the 35th, 34th, and 33rd, and finally Memory strategies with 3 sub-strategies occupying 39th, 37th, and 31st respectively. Furthermore, Table 3 shows that the mean scores of these strategies ranged between 0.69 (lowest) and 1.35 (highest). No sub-strategies of the main categories of Metacognitive and Social strategies have occurred among the least employed strategies.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that participants varied in the range and frequency of the strategies being used. All the strategies were preferred/used by the participants with

**Table 1.** The overall mean score of use of the VLSs bye all participants

| Strategy | Mean | SD | Rank |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Metacognitive | 1.98 | 0.78572 | 1 |
| Social | 1.91 | 0.63447 | 2 |
| Determination | 1.62 | 0.56884 | 3 |
| Cognitive | 1.39 | 0.59451 | 4 |
| Memory | 1.26 | 0.62262 | 5 |
| Overall | 1.63 | 0.64123 | |

**Table 2.** Top ten employed strategies by all participants

| Category | Strategy | Mean | SD | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MET2 | Learn new words by watching English-speaking movies with subtitles. | 3.09 | 1.175 | 1 |
| DET4 | Guess the meaning from context to discover the meaning of new words. | 2.55 | 1.168 | 2 |
| MET1 | Expand the knowledge of lexical items by listening to English songs. | 2.29 | 1.398 | 3 |
| COG2 | Repeat orally a single word with its meanings to learn it. | 2.17 | 1.349 | 4 |
| MEM7 | Use new vocabulary items in sentences repeatedly. | 2.14 | 0.957 | 5 |
| SOC4 | Look for extra English Information through the Internet to learn new vocabulary items. | 2.13 | 1.085 | 6 |
| SOC7 | Play English games, such as scrabble, crossword puzzles to find meaning of a new vocabulary item through group work activity. | 2.09 | 1.343 | 7 |
| SOC1 | Ask instructors of English for Arabic translation of new lexical items. | 2.04 | 1.107 | 8 |
| MET3 | Study new vocabulary items from advertisements, written signs, written notices, etc. | 2.04 | 1.156 | 9 |
| MET6 | Learn new words by listening to English radio programs. | 2.02 | 1.265 | 10 |

**Table 3.** Ten least employed strategies by all participants

| Category | Strategy | Mean | SD | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| COG8 | Write new lexical items with meanings on flash cards to learn them. | 0.69 | 0.983 | 1 |
| MEM8 | Use semantic maps to learn new words. | 0.79 | 1.045 | 2 |
| COG7 | Listen to vocabulary CDs to learn new vocabulary items. | 0.80 | 1.095 | 3 |
| MEM6 | Examine the new words' affixes (prefixes and suffixes). | 0.99 | 0.948 | 4 |
| COG6 | Associate new vocabulary items with physical objects to learn the lexical items. | 0.99 | 0.921 | 5 |
| DET6 | Guess the meaning by analyzing the structure of words (prefixes, roots, and suffixes) to discover the meaning of new words. | 1.15 | 1.056 | 6 |
| DET7 | Guess the meaning from grammatical structure of a sentence to discover the meaning of new words. | 1.26 | 1.010 | 7 |
| DET8 | Guess the meaning from aural features, such as stress, intonation, pronunciation, to discover the meaning of new words. | 1.26 | 0.972 | 8 |
| COG1 | Use a new lexical item by writing it repeatedly in sentences. | 1.32 | 0.985 | 9 |
| MEM1 | Categorize new words according to their synonyms and antonyms. | 1.35 | 1.209 | 10 |

different frequencies. It also showed that there are no fixed patterns of ranking of the employment of vocabulary learning strategies that could be similar to the results of other previous studies.

Descriptive statistics of the five main strategy categories showed that the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy category by all participants in this study was Metacognitive strategies, while the least employed one was Memory strategies. This result contradicts all the results from previous studies that are presented in the literature review above, with the only exception which was in the study of Arjomand and Sharififar (2011) where female learners tended to use Metacognitive more frequently compared to other strategies. On the other hand, Rabadi's results (2016), for example, were exactly the opposite, indicating that Metacognitive strategies were the least frequent strategies, while Memory strategies were the most frequent ones. Rabadi states that "The reason why Metacognitive strategies were the least frequent strategies might be that learners have much exposure to English in classes so they learn it consciously" (p.51). This is not the case for the Saudi subjects of this study. The difference also can be attributed to the fact that those students are at the beginning of their program and

might not be used to the new learning environment and are unaware of the learning processes where they need to rely on themselves more than they used to be in high school. The minimum use of the Memory strategies, being the least frequent used category, can support this claim. That is, this strategy is no longer preferable at this level compared to high school level. This is, in fact, a good indication where learners start moving away from rote learning. In contrast, utilizing more effective strategies such as Metacognitive strategies will make the learners regulate their learning processes away from instructors and became more independent and consequently facilitate vocabulary learning effectively.

It is worth noticing here that unlike the participants in previous studies, the overall mean score of (MS: 1.63, SD:.64123) showed that the participants in this study are generally poor/low users of VLSs. This might suggest that either the participants are not aware of all of these individual strategies or they are aware of them but they do not perceive them as very helpful learning tools. However, when it comes to the top ten employed strategies the category of the learners is different. The mean score of the first ranked used strategy was 3.05, putting learners in the category of high strategy users in this particular strategy.

| Category | Strategy | Mean | SD | Rank |
|----------|----------|------|-----|------|
| MET2 | Learn new words by watching English-speaking movies with subtitles. | 3.09 | 1.175 | 1 |

Furthermore, the mean scores of the rest of the top ten strategies (2-10) range between 2.55 and 2.02. (See Table 2 above). This range again falls within different category: the category of medium strategy use.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the vocabulary learning strategies employed by Saudi Freshmen students majoring in English as a foreign language. The overall results showed that participants use all of the different vocabulary learning strategies: Determination strategies, Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Metacognitive strategies, and Social strategies, with different degrees of frequency. By looking at the sub-categories of the strategies the results indicated that Metacognitive strategies (mean score: 1.98/4) were the most used and/or preferred strategies by all participants, followed by Social strategies (MS: 1.91), Determination strategies (MS: 1.62), Cognitive strategies (MS: 1.39) and Memory strategies (MS: 1.26) respectively. However, the overall mean score of (1.63) for the use of the strategies indicated that the participants of this study are low/poor users of vocabulary learning strategies in general. This might indicate that the context of the study and the level of proficiency, being freshmen, have contributed significantly to the results obtained here since we find a different ranking for strategy use from the previous studies. This ranking can be peculiar to the Saudi context taking into consideration the whole educational settings in the Kingdom and the type of exposure students have to English prior to enrolling in this program.

In conclusion, the findings of this study should be informative about Saudi English learners' vocabulary learning strategies, and of a particular interest to English language instructors, course designers and developers, as well as the language learners themselves. In another word, the findings can be looked at as a depiction of the current situation and should guide future planning for vocabulary teaching, vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategy training. In this regard, the idea of strategy awareness is worth more investigation to make sure that participants are all aware of the set of strategies that are available for them and thus can be trained to utilize them in their vocabulary learning yielding better vocabulary competence.

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