



An Investigation of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Iranian EFL Students in Different Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

This study aims to find out the various strategies used in learning vocabularies among Iranian EFL learners in three different proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced) in Zanjan province. The vocabulary learning strategies which have been used in this research include determination, social, memory, cognitive, and meta-cognitive which follow Schmitt's taxonomy. 110 students were randomly selected from two language institutes in Zanjan. Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies' questionnaire was administered to the learners with three proficiency levels. Then, descriptive statistics and Anova were utilized to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics revealed that the participants of the study regardless of their proficiency levels were generally medium strategy users who used all these strategies moderately except for the determination strategies that were used in high level. In addition, basic learners used all different types of strategies more frequently than intermediate and advanced learners. By comparing two other proficiency levels, advanced learners used determination strategies and meta-cognitive strategies more frequently than intermediate learners, while social, memory and cognitive strategies were used more frequently by Intermediates. In order to perceive if the results were statistically significant, Anova for between group mean differences was conducted. It revealed the fact that there is no significant difference among learners with different proficiency levels in application of determination and meta-cognitive strategies while the learners with lower proficiency level used social, memory and cognitive strategies more frequently, that is, these three strategies were used more frequently by basic, intermediate and advanced learners respectively.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies, Language learning strategies, Vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is of prime importance for those who want to learn a language and it is considered to be a core subject in formal education. Without having access to a range of vocabulary, we won't be able to name objects, to express ideas about specific subjects or actions and get our meanings across.

1.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Strategies used for language learning refer to the conscious and semi-conscious behaviors and ideas that students of language use with an ultimate purpose of excelling their learning and comprehension of the target language (Schmitt, 2002). Vocabulary learning behaviors fall under a subcategory of language learning strategies and refer to a specific type of language learning strategy focused on the acquisition of vocabulary. There isn't a clear definition for the term but as Schmitt states, it is "any sets of operations, steps, plans, and routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information" (Carril, 2009, p.69). These techniques are used by different learners at different stages of learning in order to expedite their acquisition and retention of the required terms. Furthermore, vocabulary learning strategies are so varied and differ from one learner to another in terms of different variables such as age, personality, gender, attitude, language proficiency level, etc.

1.2 Statement of Problem and Purpose of the study

Vocabulary isn't significantly practiced in EFL contexts in Iran. It is a very challenging task to learn vocabulary and it is considered an unproductive experience. Most of the times, higher level learners lose interest in English when they come across difficult lexical items and most of the times they might want to skip these words because they are difficult to consolidate in memory or they might simply forget them after a short period of time due to a lack of knowledge about the various kinds of VLSs.

Strategies in learning vocabulary are very important and unfortunately students in any proficiency level in Iran aren't familiar with most of them. Results on exams have shown that students can't make use of the lexical words they learn properly and the lexical items they already know fade into oblivion most of the time. Learning vocabulary and keeping

its retention need rehearsal and use of different strategies by learners, thus, familiarity with them makes students become more cognizant of their own strategies and they will be avid to work towards learning the kinds of strategies they are less familiar with.

Based on what was stated above, the purpose of the current study is to investigate Iranian EFL learners' application of vocabulary learning strategies with regard to their proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced).

1.3 Research Questions

The following questions will be answered in this research:

1. Are Iranian English learners, high, low or medium strategy users?
2. What are the most and least frequently used and significant strategies by Iranian learners with respect to their proficiency level?

2. Literature Review

Different researchers have provided various vocabulary learning strategies and they have classified these strategies into different categories according to their findings. Several taxonomies of VLS have been proposed so far, being those of Gu and Johnson (1996), Nation (2001) and Schmitt (1997) the most outstanding. The taxonomy developed by Schmitt (1997) has myriad of advantages as stated by Jimenez-Catalan (Carril, 2009, p. 72). It's more standardized and it collects the data from students efficiently. It's quite easy for the data to be coded, classified and managed in computing programs because it follows the theory of learning strategies and theories of memory. In addition, it can be used in groups of different ages, those who come from educational backgrounds and target languages which allow comparison with other studies as well. Therefore, Schmitt's taxonomy of VLSs will be used as an instrument to gather the required information from the participants in this study.

Schmitt took four of the six categories established by Oxford, namely, social, memory, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies and designed a new category, which includes those strategies used to discover what the new words mean without asking from another person: determination strategies (Carril, 2009, p.72-86). All these VLSs are in turn subdivided into two main groups: *strategies for discovering the understanding of new words and strategies used to consolidate them once found*. Subcategories of *discovery strategies* are determination and social strategies.

It is worth to note that the strategies alone are not the only factor, but the level of proficiency of each student that tells you which strategies are most effective to whom and at what level the students are most likely to succeed in their learning. This is yet another important variable that should be well understood. Now, let's review the studies done by other researchers on vocabulary learning strategies.

One of the most recent studies by Tilfarlioglu and Bozgeyik (2012), was to investigate if there was a connection between Turkish learners' application of vocabulary learning strategies and their English vocabulary proficiency level. They found that strategies used by Turkish learners were so varied and they were in a correlation with the learners' habits and thoughts. Moreover, strategies related to memory were in congruence with the learner's proficiency levels in terms of academic and general vocabulary. However, none of the VLSs predicted participants' vocabulary proficiency levels.

Lachini (2008) conducted a research on 120 female language learners of three proficiency levels in order to perceive if there was a relationship between the student's level of proficiency and the Cream VLSs which include creative, reflective, effective, active, and motivated techniques. The results demonstrated that students applied these strategies with different frequencies. It reflected that their proficiency level affected the learners' application of vocabulary learning strategies and their performance on vocabulary size test.

Another recent study by Rahimi and Shams (2012), searched to find if VLSs had a significant effect on the learners' scores obtained from the vocabulary tests. The results showed that VLSs had positive effect on the scores of learners who studied in intermediate level because those who got a good score were seen to use the techniques in the questionnaire more frequently to help them in better understanding of the words. Meta-cognitive strategies were used by those who gained a high score on vocabulary; however, social strategies were used least often.

Furthermore, Kafipour and Naveh (2011), canvassed to get to an understanding of how the comprehension of reading can be influenced by the use of vocabulary learning strategies. They applied Schmitt's taxonomy of VLSs that includes social, cognitive, determination, memory, and meta-cognitive strategies. They concluded that the most frequently used strategies were meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies and the least frequently used one was social strategy. However, the only strategy that showed a correlation for the comprehension of student's reading was social.

Another research done by Arjomand and Sharififar (2011), tried to discover the relationship between the application of vocabulary learning strategies and gender. The results confirmed that different genders showed a different tendency for using vocabulary strategies. Both genders used social strategies in a low level. The strategies which were used by females were cognitive, determination, memory and meta-cognitive, on the contrary, males had a tendency towards using meta-cognitive, cognitive, determination and memory.

3. Methodology

The research design in this study is quantitative. Descriptive and referential statistics were used to answer research questions.

3.1 Participants

The current study was conducted in two different language institutes, Parse and Iran Language Institute (known as ILI) in Zanjan. The subjects of this study were 110 female and male Iranian EFL learners. They were in three different proficiency levels i.e. there were 38 subjects from Basics, 34 from Intermediates and 38 from Advanced. The proficiency levels of the participants were determined by the placement tests of the institutes. Participants belonged to different age groups ranging from 13 years of age and above.

3.2 Instrumentation

For the present study, Vocabulary Learning Strategies' Questionnaire (VLSQ) by Schmitt (1997) was administered to gather the data. It contains 36 questions on 5 different lexical learning strategies which are determination, social, memory, cognitive and meta-cognitive. The questionnaire includes 36 different VLSs. Items 1-7 belong to determination strategies, items 8-13 are social strategies, items 14-26 are memory, 27-30 are cognitive and items 31-34 belong to meta-cognitive strategies. There were also two open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire asking them about their own strategy regarding vocabulary learning. Furthermore, the results of the institutes' placement test were used to categorize the participants as beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire was piloted first and revised based on the feedback received in pilot phase. The final version was administered to the participants.

3.3 Procedures

The respondents of different proficiency groups completed the questionnaire in one session within 10 minutes. The rubric and instructions were clearly stated to the subjects so that the process of filling out the questionnaire would be clear enough for them. After collecting the data, descriptive statistics was utilized to analyze the data. Measures of frequency (mode, mean, median) were used to provide precise quantitative information about the typical behavior of learners with respect to the most frequently used vocabulary strategies. Anova was conducted to provide information on whether or not the three different proficiency levels differed significantly from each other with respect to the applied VLSs.

4. Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics was applied to answer the first research question i.e. are Iranian English learners high, low or medium strategy users? According to scoring system, score 2.4 and below show low strategy use, between 2.4 and 3.5 shows medium strategy use and score 3.5 and above show high strategy use.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Strategy use by Respondents

Strategies	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Determination	110	2.14	4.71	3.51	0.52
Social	110	1.33	4.50	2.84	0.70
Memory	110	1.69	4.46	3.22	0.57
Cognitive	110	1.50	5.00	3.27	0.75
Metacognitive	110	1.50	4.75	3.05	0.63
Overall	110	2.08	4.17	3.20	0.42

As depicted in Table 1, it is completely apparent that Iranian English learners are medium strategy users with a total mean score of 3.20. Of all five strategies that were on the questionnaire, Social (mean=2.84), Meta-cognitive (mean=3.05), Memory (mean=3.22), and Cognitive (mean=3.27), were used quite moderately among the subjects. This could be because they were unaware of different types of strategies for vocabulary learning that may have not been included in their syllabuses. Also, it seems that the teachers themselves aren't aware of the strategies and there is no introduction on these kinds of methods and how to use them. This is in congruence with the results Kafipour and Naveh (2011), came upon in which undergraduate students were found as medium users with regards to vocabulary strategy use due to the fact that these methods were not commonplace among the learners. In addition, this finding may be because of the students' limited range of vocabulary strategies. According to the open ended questions on the questionnaire, it was clear that most learners had their own way of vocabulary learning and they found it quite useful. It is clear that they only suffice to one strategy and think it is the best, like the use of repetition, using flash cards, asking questions about words, etc. However, it is interesting to mention that according to the results, determination strategies were used highly by the students with a mean of 3.51. It perhaps is easier, faster or more available for a student to look up a word in a dictionary rather than communicating with a native speaker in order to consolidate a vocabulary.

This finding is similar to the study conducted by Riazi and Rahimi (2005). They found Iranian EFL learners as medium strategy users who applied meta-cognitive techniques most frequently in comparison with other types of strategies. This study is also in line with the results found by Gani Hamzah, Kafipour, and Kumar Abdullah (2009). The learners in this study were mediocre in learning new words. It's said that it could be because of the specific course, Study Skills, which they cover in their first semester. This course makes them more familiar with a diversity of vocabulary learning strategies. Moreover, it helps them know and utilize these kinds of techniques when acquiring a new word. The learners also applied determination strategies in a higher level compared to the other strategies.

To answer the second research question which is going to investigate how learners with different proficiency levels used these strategies, mean scores of different proficiency groups are compared and contrasted.

Table 2. Mean strategy scores for three levels of proficiency

Proficiency level	Determination	Social	Memory	Cognitive	Metacognitive
Basic	3.63	3.16	3.48	3.48	3.23
Intermediate	3.40	2.89	3.17	3.35	2.89
Advanced	3.51	2.47	3.01	3.00	3.02

As Table 2 reveals, the learners in basic level of proficiency used all strategies more frequently than other levels with the highest mean belonging to determination strategies (mean=3.63). This is in accordance with the results of Raquel Fernandez Carril (2009) who found out that first year students of English and even those with an extensive foreign language learning experience are more interested in vocabulary learning.

Advanced levels, however, used Determination (mean=3.51) and Meta-cognitive (mean=3.02) more than Intermediates who used these two strategies with mean scores of 3.40 and 2.89 respectively. It can be understood that advanced learners have a strong tendency towards using determination techniques because of their adequate knowledge of English and better English comprehension. The reason behind more frequent use of meta-cognitive strategy can also be due to the fact that the learners are not exposed to the target language much in Iran; therefore, they tend to use it consciously. In other words, they can't pick up or acquire the language unconsciously due to lack of exposure to the English language which is an important technique in learning vocabulary. This is similar to the findings of Riazi and Rahimi (2005).

On the other hand, intermediate learners used cognitive (mean=3.35), memory (mean=3.17), and social strategies (mean=2.89) more frequently which means they resort to repetition, keeping a notebook, using flash cards, etc. that help them in retaining a vocabulary and its meaning. Memory strategies perhaps come in handy for them and are more convenient probably because it's a traditional way of retaining new words in mind. Furthermore, they might find it easier to communicate with their teachers or classmates to ask for the meaning of a word.

To find out if these findings are statistically significant, Anova for between group mean differences was conducted.

Table 3. Anova for Between Group Mean Differences

Between Group mean differences	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Determination	0.939	2	0.469	1.746	0.179
Social	9.016	2	4.508	10.699	0.000
Memory	4.483	2	2.242	7.577	0.001
Cognitive	4.650	2	2.325	4.350	0.015
Metacognitive	2.134	2	1.067	2.744	0.069

According to Table 3, F (observed) for determination and meta-cognitive strategies are 1.746 and 0.069 respectively that are not significant at $P < 0.05$. It shows that differences among mean scores of determination and meta-cognitive strategies in three proficiency levels are not significant; however, F (observed) and the difference among mean scores of social (sig. =0.000), memory (sig. =0.001) and cognitive strategies (sig. = 0.015) of three proficiency levels were found significant at $P < 0.05$. This finding shows that there is no significant difference among learners with different proficiency levels in the application of determination and meta-cognitive strategies while the learners with lower proficiency level used social, memory and cognitive strategies more frequently, that is, these three strategies were used more frequently by Basics, Intermediates and Advanced respectively. Basic learners used these three types of strategies because they may be strongly motivated to memorize as many words as they can and keep them in their memory for a while. Moreover, they may really feel the need to learn words in the first stages of learning a language; hence, they try to expose themselves to myriad of vocabularies and find ways to learn them. It is usually stated that it's better to know a wide variety of words when you first start learning a language. Intermediates, on the contrary, seem to be more moderate when it comes to using these strategies. Advanced learners applied social, memory and cognitive strategies less than intermediate and basic learners which might be because of their willingness to search for other types of strategies which may be more useful for them. This is in congruence with the findings of the study done by Brigitta Dóczi (2011). She found that higher number of years of study correlated with less practice on a regular basis or less use of active strategies. It is stated that this might be due to the reason that basic learners are new to the language and they are completely aware and conscious of their learning process; on the other hand, students in higher levels base their learning on the experience they already have.

5. Conclusion

As was stated in previous section, the participants of this study were medium strategy users. Considering the proficiency level, the learners did not differ significantly in the application of determination and meta-cognitive

strategies while less proficient learners applied more of social, memory and cognitive strategies in comparison with more proficient learners. It indicates that when the students gain more knowledge of the language, they resort less to social strategies that require interaction with different people, and also cognitive strategies that involve repetition, taking notes and highlighting new words.

The study can be valuable to teachers and learners and course designers as well. Learners can get more familiar with the strategies as they go through solving the questions on the survey, teachers can be trained in learning these strategies and teaching them appropriately to the learners and also the institutes can apply them in order to help their learners to gain a better quality in their vocabulary learning styles. Since learners are so motivated and enthusiastic to learn about these strategies, course designers can include them in the text books as a guide for the vocabulary sections of the books. Furthermore, the findings of the current study can be used to decide what kinds of strategies need to be included in the text books of each proficiency level in institutes to make learning optimal, quicker and easier.

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