

The Type of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by ESL Students in University Putra Malaysia

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Abstract

One of the most important challenges that learners will face during the process of second language learning is learning vocabulary. Vocabulary has been recognized as crucial to language use in which insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the learners led to difficulties in second language learning. Thus, in the case of learning the vocabulary in second language, students need to be educated with vocabulary learning strategies.

The present study examined the type of vocabulary learning strategies used by Malaysian ESL students majoring at Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) whereby ESL students at Universiti Putra Malaysia is a population that has been rarely included in any previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies. Based on the aim of this study, it was decided that the best method for this investigation to better understand the use of VLSs by these particular students is to adopt the qualitative research design. Hence, the method of conducting is an open-ended interview that was conducted individually with ten students at the Faculty of Education Studies in UPM. The concluded strategies such as the learning a word through reading, the use of monolingual dictionary, the use of various English language media, and applying new English word in their daily conversation where are related to memory, determination, metacognitive strategies respectively are popular strategies and the learners are keen in using them.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies, VLS, LLS, ESL

1. Introduction:

Acquiring a second language, involves different areas such as motivation, learners' needs, learning environment, learning strategies and language awareness. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore second language learning strategies. In any event, learning strategies are, defined by Chamot and Kupper (1989) as "techniques which students use to comprehend, store, and remember information and skills" (p.9).

However, learning strategies have been used for thousands of years as Oxford (1990) mentioned that mnemonic or memory tools used in ancient times to facilitate narrators remember their lines. Studies on language learning strategies started in the mid 1960. Subsequently, the past twenty years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of second language learning strategies (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990 and Oxford, 1990). Nevertheless, Oxford (2003) defined language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations"(p.8).

While particular strategies are used by second language learners for the acquisition of new words in the second language are called 'vocabulary learning strategies' (Gu, 1994). Whereas, language learning strategies (LLSs) are sub category of general learning strategies and vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are consider as a part of language learning strategies (Nation, 2001).

The research to date has tended to focus on vocabulary learning strategies rather than language learning strategies. Several studies have produced taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt and Schmitt 1993; Schmitt,

1997; Nation, 2001; Fan, 2003; and Gu, 2003). First, Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) divided learning vocabulary in to remembering a word and learning a new word. Secondly, GU (2003) classified second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies as cognitive, metacognitive, memory and activation strategies. Thirdly, Schmitt (1997) improved vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford (1990) into determination (not seeking another person's expertise) strategies, social (seeking another person's expertise) and though the remembering category comprises social, memorization, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Finally, Fan (2003) who refined Gu (2003)'s classification, categorized vocabulary learning strategies into a "primary category" which contains dictionary strategies and guessing strategies as well as, "remembering category" which integrates repetition, association, grouping, analysis and known words strategies.

2. Vocabulary Learning Strategy (VLSs)

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are steps taken by the language learners to acquire new English words. There are a wide range of different vocabulary learning strategies as demonstrated by the classifications of vocabulary learning strategies are proposed by different researchers (Stoffer, 1995; Nation, 2001; and Gu, 2003). In addition, there is a wide-ranging inventory of vocabulary learning strategies developed by Schmitt in 1997. While a variety of definitions of the vocabulary learning strategies have been suggested, this study has applied the definition that is suggested by Schmitt (1997) who saw it as two main groups of strategies:

- 1).Discovery strategies: Strategies that are used by learners to discover learning of words;
- 2).Consolidation strategies: a word is consolidated once it has been encountered.

He categorized vocabulary learning strategies into five sub-categories:

- 1).Determination strategies: they are individual learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997).
- 2).Social strategies: they are learners learn new words through interaction with others (Schmitt, 1997).
- 3).Memory strategies: they are strategies, whereby learners link their learning of new words to mental processing by associating their existing or background knowledge with the new words (Schmitt, 1997).
- 4).Cognitive strategies: they are strategies that do not engage learners in mental processing but is more mechanical means (Schmitt, 1997) and
- 5).Metacognitive strategies: they are strategies related to processes involved in monitoring, decision-making, and evaluation of one's progress (Schmitt, 1997).

After viewing these different classifications the prudent study used Schmitt's taxonomy as a basis of the study. It was developed based on Oxford (2003)'s classification of language learning strategies. The classification of strategies perhaps is before the most wide-ranging in vocabulary learning strategies usage. Although, Schmitt's five major strategies maintained their application in an ESL/EFL environment due to the fact that he established his taxonomy using Japanese L2 learners. Similarly, the present study has used Malaysian second language learners' samples of study. The use of VLSs counts on a number of factors such as proficiency, motivation, and culture (Schmitt, 2000). This is because culture and environment can influence their preference for exacting learning strategies (Schmitt, 2000).

However, far too little attention has been paid to vocabulary learning strategies used by ESL undergraduate students in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The purpose of this study was to determine what type of vocabulary learning strategies used by ESL students.

3. Cognitive Theory

The cognitive orientation describes second language learning as a complex cognitive skill which, similar to other such skills, engages cognitive systems (such as perception, and information processing) to overcome limitations in human mental capacity which may inhibit performance (Ellis 2000, as cited by Višnja, 2008). One of the important concepts of cognitive theory which influence the vocabulary learning strategies is learning strategies. This study is conducted to examine the vocabulary learning strategies which provide understandings of what vocabulary learning strategies are all about.

4. Classifications of Language Learning Strategies

There are many and various classifications of language learning strategies. O'Malley et al. (1985) declared the use of 24 strategies employed by learners of English as a second language in the United States. They divided these strategies into three main categories: "Metacognitive", "Cognitive", and "Socio-affective" strategies. In fact, there is another accepted classification as suggested by (Oxford, 1990). She distinguished between the direct and indirect strategies. She added that direct strategies contain "Memory", "Cognitive", and "Compensation" strategies while

indirect strategies include “Metacognitive”, “Affective”, and ‘Social’ strategies. Each of these is divided into a number of subscales. Oxford (1990) distinguished several aspects of learning strategies; 1) Relate to communicative competence, 2) Let learners become self-directed, 3) Increase the role of teachers, 4) Are problem-oriented, 5) Special behaviors by the learners, 6) Include many aspects of the learners as well as the cognitive approach, 7) Support learning both directly and indirectly, 8) Are not always observable, 9) Are teachable, 10) Are flexible, and 11) May be influenced by a variety of factors.

Oxford and Crookall (1989) described language learning strategies as “learning techniques, actions, learning to learn, problem-solving, or learning skills” (p.37). They come to an end that no matter what learning strategies are called, strategies can make learning more efficient and effective and the strategies used by learners could lead towards more proficiency or competence in a second language. Oxford classified an extensive category of language learning strategies under two super ordinate categories as the Direct and Indirect strategies. Figure 1 presents Oxford (1990)’s classification.

With regards the direct strategies (which are more directly associated with the learning and the use of the target language in making good judgment that they require the mental processing of the language), these are the Memory strategies which “[...] store and retrieve new information”; Cognitive strategies which “[...] enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means”, ranging from repeating to analyzing expressions to summarizing and Compensation strategies which “[...] allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge” (Oxford,1990, p. 37). As for the Indirect strategies (which help the learning process internally, i.e. which support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language), there are the metacognitive strategies which “allow learners to control their own cognition”; Affective strategies which “help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes”; and Social strategies “help students learn through interaction with others” (Oxford 1990, p. 135). However, Schmitt (1997) classified vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford’s taxonomy.

5. Inter-relationships between VSL and LLS

'Language learning strategies' form a sub class of 'learning strategies' in general whereas 'vocabulary learning strategies' constitute a sub class of language learning strategies. There are researchers (Oxford and Scarcellat, 1994 and Schmitt, 1997) who have acknowledged that in addressing vocabulary learning strategies, one should not lose sight of its correlation with language learning strategies.

A considerable number of researchers (Wenden and Rubin 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990 and Schmitt, 1997) asserted that VLS form a sub-class of framework for language learning strategies and for this reason are applicable to a wide variety of language learning (LL) tasks, sighting from the more remote ones, such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar to integrative tasks such as reading comprehension and oral communication.

A few studies which include a study by Schmitt (1997) have manifested that LLS are not inherently ‘good’ for various factors, for example the contexts in which the strategies are used, frequency of use, the combination with other strategies, language portability , background knowledge, the texts, target language, LL proficiency level, and language characteristics.

The importance and popularity of vocabulary learning strategies in the group of language learning strategies in terms of their actual use is reflected by the fact that the vast majority of language learning strategies listed in taxonomies such as in Oxford (1990)’s, are either vocabulary learning strategies (all strategies in the memory category), or can be used for vocabulary learning tasks. In spite of this, research into language learning strategies has tended to neglect vocabulary learning strategies, preferring to focus on language learning as a whole. However, one of the most significant current discussions in language learning strategies which is related to the present study is vocabulary learning strategies which will be explained in following section.

In learning any language, vocabulary is the center focal point of acquisition. As put forward by McCarthy (1992) “without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way (p.50)”. Vocabulary has been gradually recognized as crucial to language use in which insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the learners led to difficulties in second language learning.

Nation (2000) describes ‘learning burden’ of a word as the amount of effort that a learner puts in learning the word. According to him, “different words have different learning burdens for learners with different backgrounds and each of the aspects of what it means to know a word can contribute to its learning burden” (p. 23). Thus, in the case of learning the vocabulary in second language, students need to be educated with vocabulary learning strategies. They are mostly persuaded to use basic vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 2000). However, teachers may help to decrease students’ learning burdens by providing some organized vocabulary learning strategies for them.

This research was investigated the application of vocabulary learning strategies by undergraduate ESL students (sophomore) who are studying teaching English as a second language at UPM. Thus, with a small sample size and the nature of the study (qualitative study) caution must be applied, as the results of this research might not be transferable to other ESL students in the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

The present study attempts to explore the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) experiences in process by undergraduate ESL students in Universiti Putra Malaysia. This study aims to answer the following question; "What are the vocabularies learning strategies actively employed by undergraduate ESL students in learning the English language?".

6. Method & Materials:

The purpose of the present study is to examine the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by Malaysian ESL students at University-level to better understand the ways that they applied to learn new words in English.

It was decided that the best method for this investigation to better understand the use of VLSs by these particular students is to adopt the qualitative research design. Cresswell (2008) identified qualitative research as an investigative method for understanding a phenomenon based on separate methodological traditions of inquiry that elicit human conditions or social problem. In addition, the researcher is the main instrument of analyzing the data. Personally, the researcher is interested in this topic because she has been taught in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context where it was very difficult to gain access to teaching and learning materials of the English language.

The study is conducted in Universiti Putra Malaysia. The university is located in Selangor and was formally established 1993. It is ranked among the best universities by The Times Higher Education Supplement produced (THES) annually in Malaysia. More focus was centered on Faculty of Educational Studies and the Department of Language and Humanities Education.

As Merriam (1988) explained, interview utilization is one of the major sources to obtain qualitative data from subjects. Hence, the method of conducting an interview is one of the most popular means to investigate, research and to inquire data from the one phenomenon. The interviews were conducted individually with ten students (four males and four females) who are randomly selected between September 25th and October 15th, 2009, at the Faculty of Education Studies in UPM to gain a deep understanding of the subjects' varied backgrounds in vocabulary learning, the strategies that they used to learn new words in English.

7. Results and Discussion:

7.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies Use

The results showed that ESL learners in UPM are not aware of most of the vocabulary strategies mentioned in the present study. On the other hand, they are usually using vocabulary learning strategies in either a medium or low frequency. The common and specific strategies have used by participants will be discussed in following section.

7.2 The Common Strategies Use

The Schmitt (1997)'s taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies is utilized in categorizing the vocabulary learning strategies demonstrated by the data of the current study. The findings of the study showed that ESL Malaysian students used determination, cognitive, social and metacognitive strategies which are the most common strategies are employed comprehensively by participants of the present investigation. Therefore, all students used at least one of the most popular strategies such as using monolingual dictionary, guessing from the context, and learning through the English language media.

The strategies which required the use of reliable materials and tools are also among the highly used group, e.g. reading the English language texts, using English-language media, and watching TV. Most of these strategies which mentioned by all subjects in this study are require only a low level mental processing where subjects seem to rely on strategies which mostly require rehearsal and meaning determinations without any type of deep processing. The strategies which have been mentioned by participants are listed according to their category and will be explained in next section.

7.3 Learning New Words through Reading

The first common strategies which have been used by participants was guessing from textual context is under the determination category. This is determination strategy where one makes guesses from the textual context.

One possible explanation for the findings is related to the Malaysian education system whereby in most of the English language classrooms, teachers have used the same teaching method such as using English newspapers to improve and assist the learning and acquiring of new vocabulary process. The findings are consistent with Haggan

(1990) who has found the use of newspapers in EFL classes to be a successful method. However, the most acceptable explanation for using this strategy which is also true for the current study has been provided by Oxford and Scarcellat (1994) as “by far the most useful strategy is guessing from various given contexts” (p.237).

7.4 Use of Dictionaries

Another common strategy was using a monolingual dictionary (e.g. English to English dictionary) which is under categorization of determination strategies and has been mentioned by Ahmed, Jamal, Sarah, Rose, and Jim as one of the common strategies that have been used by them. The popularity of this strategy is expected simply because the use of a monolingual dictionary is a common practice among second language learners. These dictionaries give detailed guidance on pronunciation, grammar, and usage with explanations written in a controlled, simplified vocabulary. Other than that, the dictionaries also provide examples of words used in various contexts (Carter, 1987).

The monolingual dictionaries are designed for native users but publishers have later on developed this type of dictionary for L2 students as well (Oxford and Scarcellat, 1994). An explanation for the common use of a monolingual dictionary among these students in UPM is that the new curriculum in Malaysia is focusing on independent learners. This method is widely performed in the English language classes in Malaysia. However, this finding is in agreement with the findings of Noor and Amir (2009) which showed the commonly used dictionary strategies among Malaysian students.

In addition, in Malaysian classrooms, most of the time, the teachers encourage the students to refer to the dictionary and the students are expected to learn new words on their own. Another reason that can be accounted for the result is related to the process of learning language as the participants become mature, the more advanced they become. This advocated Ahmed’s study (1989) on poor and good language learners among ESL students in Khartoum.

In other words, the use of monolingual dictionary in this study is consistent with (Ahmed, 1989). An explanation that he presented, which is also true for the subjects of the present study, is that more successful learners at the upper proficiency levels have moved on from using bilingual dictionaries to using monolingual ones, in which they make use of some of the information in such dictionaries beyond merely just the definitions.

7.5 Applying New English Words in Their Daily Speaking

Hence, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study was that the respondents applied new English words in their daily speaking. It can be considered as a social strategy. They practice new words among friends in the university (mentioned by five subjects), ask questions in the classrooms (two subjects), and interact with native speakers (mentioned by three subjects). A possible explanation for this might be that these students benefitted from the receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary learning in second language.

These findings are consistent with those of Nation (2001) and Webb (2005) who found the receptive and productive role of vocabulary learning in second language. However, Monderia and Wiersm (2004) explained the receptive vocabulary learning as learning the meaning of a second language word to target language, and productive vocabulary learning makes the learner able to translate a word from L1 to L2. Another possible explanation for this issue have been identified by Webb (2005) who indicated that the greater part of vocabulary is learned receptively through reading or listening and production through writing and speaking.

7.6 Use of Media

Another important finding of this investigation showed that, using the English-language media (songs, movies, internet, computer games, TV programs, etc.) is also among the high frequency strategies are used by the students. Besides, using materials which involve authentic language use is also listed among the frequency strategies used. A possible explanation is that the popularity of this metacognitive strategy may relate to the accessibility of the materials. Moreover, authentic materials are good in terms of learning new words in their contexts. As mentioned in the literature review strategies involving authentic language use are demonstrated by Stoffer (1995). This category was the first category of Stoffer (1995) classification and later Schmitt (2000) included this strategy in his taxonomy as sub category of metacognitive strategies. This result may be explained by the fact that the highly developed technology is becoming a major part of vocabulary learning and second language learning process.

7.7 Social Strategies

It is interesting to note that in all ten subjects of this study, none of the students described studying words with the help of others in purposed of learning words. The participants only shared their problems with others when they couldn’t find any other sources to learn those unknown words. These results are similar to the results of the study

which has been done by Schmitt (1997) which showed that using social strategies are rather popular; this data also revealed that social strategies are frequently used by subjects of this study.

8. Conclusions, Implications & Recommendations

The study has discovered that the ESL students perceive the substance of vocabulary as a branch of language learning. However, some strategies such as the learning a word through reading, the use of monolingual dictionary, the use of various English-language media, and applying new English word in their daily speaking where are related to memory, determination, metacognitive strategies respectively are popular strategies and the learners are keen in using them. On the other hand, strategies which require cognitively deeper processing such as putting English labels on physical objects, listening to tapes of word lists and writing down the new words and their meanings on cards is not mentioned by participants of this study.

Based on the results, some implications can be observed. First of all, an advantage of this study is that it will increase the public awareness on the importance of vocabulary learning strategies in second language learning and teaching. As Oxford (2003) mentioned "Vocabulary is not explicitly taught in most language classes" (p. 9).

The results of the current study can assist language teachers to improve their teaching methods. Second, teachers who are interested in their students' performance in learn the English vocabulary can introduce the vocabulary learning strategies and techniques to their students by designing useful tasks and giving relevant assignments. Next, unfortunately based on the interviews conducted, most of the students are not aware of the existence of the numerous strategies used to learn words other than using dictionaries and rote memorization.

Future studies on vocabulary learning strategies can be carried out from two viewpoints. Studies on the individuals' differences of language learners from primary to university level can be conducted both in qualitative and quantitative approaches. In addition, studying the effect of culture, home environment, peer groups, effective teaching methods and classroom atmosphere on vocabulary learning strategies could be very helpful to get better understanding of the relevant strategies.

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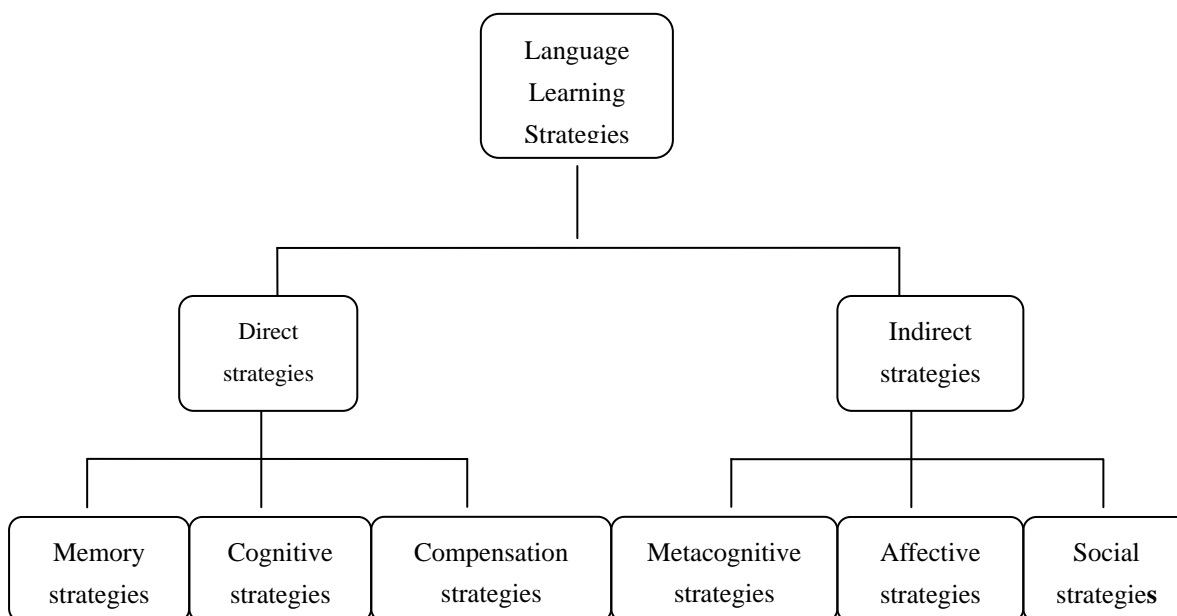


Figure1.Summary of Oxford's (1990) Classification of LLS