Vocabulary Learning Strategies of English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners: a Literature Review

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Vocabulary Learning Strategies of English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners: a Literature Review

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is one of the major challenges foreign language learners face during the process of learning a language (Ghazal, 2007). One way to alley the problem is to assist students in becoming independent learners during the course of L2 vocabulary learning. Furthermore, Ghazal (2007) explains that this could be achieved through instructing learners to apply vocabulary learning strategies as efficiently as possible.

This study has reviewed significant literature and the importance of reviewing the literature in the field was to realize the implications of our understanding of this relevant literature for the study referred to in this paper. The definitions, taxonomies and factors which pertain to language learning strategies and which are present in the literature have clarified the concepts.

Furthermore, this research brings to light the common strategies that learners use in vocabulary learning. It also discusses the different strategies at length and gives valuable recommendations and concludes with further research implications.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, first language, second language, strategies, cognitive and meta-cognitive, memory

1.1 Abbreviations:

ESL/EFL-Learners of English as a Second/Foreign language
L1 - Native Language
L2- Second Language
LLS- Language Learning Strategies
SLA-Second Language Acquisition
VLB- Vocabulary Learning Beliefs
VLS-Vocabulary Learning Strategies

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This paper examines the literature and research relevant to Vocabulary Learning Strategies, current research done in the area of vocabulary learning strategies for English as a Foreign Language. It discusses the different strategies that have been used by learners individually or collectively to acquire new vocabulary, some key concepts associated with this field and how they are able to maintain the vocabulary.

2.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are methods that students employ to enhance their own learning. Strategies are important for language learning because they are a device for active, self-responsible learning. Students take more control of their own learning, which is necessary for developing academic competence. Learners who use appropriate language learning strategies yielded greater proficiency and self-confidence (Oxford, 1990). Most of the literature which has been studied provides a similar point of view and highlights the importance of having vocabulary learning strategies. It does not mean that the strategies are only limited to the learners, it is equally important to the teachers as it is to the learners. Having knowledge about the different types of choices in vocabulary learning strategies will help teachers, researchers and curriculum developers to design appropriate materials for classroom purposes. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are intuitively appealing to teachers and learners. It has also become a popular research topic among researchers in the last two decades (Yongqui, 2010).

2.3 Summary of Major Studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Some major researches have been carried out since 1995 which include: Sanaoui (1995), Stoffer (1995), Moir (1996), Gu and Johnson (1996), Lawson and Hogben (1996), Schmitt (1997), Porte (1988), Kudo (1999), Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999), Lin (2001), Catalan (2003), Fan (2003). These studies have provided insights into the process of vocabulary learning and the strategies which have been used by individuals. These are as follows:

Sanaoui (1995) identified two distinctive approaches to vocabulary learning of adult learners: those who structured their vocabulary learning and those who did not. Structured learners engaged in independent study, did self-initiated learning activities and recorded the lexical items they were learning, reviewed such records, and practiced using vocabulary items outside the classroom (Bastanfar & Hashemi, 2010). Sanaoui's research showed that structured Learners were more successful than those who followed an unstructured approach.

Furthermore, Gu and Johnson (1996) identified six types of strategy - guessing, dictionary, note-taking, rehearsal, encoding, and activation - together with two other factors: beliefs about vocabulary learning and metacognitive regulation. Metacognitive regulation consists of strategies for selective attention and self-initiation. The latter make the meaning of vocabulary items clear through the use of a variety of means. Guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies are labeled as cognitive strategies. Rehearsal and encoding categories are classified under memory strategies. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding strategies include strategies such as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word-structure. Activation strategies include those strategies through which learners actually use new words in different contexts (Bastanfar & Hashemi, 2010).

In addition, Lawson and Hogben (1996), in a classification which is more a reflection of the strategies, categorized the four strategies as: repetition, word feature analysis, simple elaboration and complex elaboration. The strategy "repetition" includes reading of related words, simple rehearsal, writing of word and meaning, cumulative rehearsal and testing. The "word feature analysis" contains spelling, word classification and suffix. Simple elaboration consists of sentence translation, simple use of context, appearance similarity, sound link and complex elaboration includes complex use of context, paraphrase and mnemonic. In the research, it was found that learners who had used a greater range of learning strategies recalled more of the learned words later. However, all the learners alike tended to favor simple repetition strategies over more complex elaboration strategies, despite the fact that the latter yielded higher recall. Hence the researchers concluded that there is a need to present strategies more directly during language teaching since students are not aware of the advantages of these procedures (Bastanfar & Hashemi, 2010).

Schmitt (1997) devised his taxonomy, self-reportedly, in response to the lack of a comprehensive list of vocabulary learning strategies. He organized 58 strategies under five types: determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive. His categories were inspired by Oxford's (1990) inventory of general language learning strategies but included some modifications. Thus, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies have been adopted from Oxford (1990). The modification was that he made a distinction between discovery and consolidation strategies. Determination strategies are used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience" (Schmitt, 1997). For example, learners try to discover the meaning of a new word by guessing it with the

help of context, structural knowledge of language, and reference materials. It is also possible to discover the meaning of a word through asking someone for help (Bastanfar & Hashemi, 2010).

Finally, Nation's (2001) theoretically-oriented taxonomy makes a basic distinction between the aspects of vocabulary knowledge from the sources of vocabulary knowledge and from learning processes; hence, three general classes: planning, sources, and processes, each covering a subset of key strategies. 'Planning' involves choosing where and how to focus attention on a particular vocabulary item and contains strategies for choosing words, choosing aspects of word knowledge and choosing strategies as well as planning repetition. 'Sources' involves finding information about the word from the word form itself, from the context, from a reference source such as dictionaries or glossaries and from analogies and connections with other languages. Process means establishing word knowledge through noticing, retrieving and generating strategies (Bastanfar & Hashemi, 2010).

## 2.4 Categorization of the Strategies

In all research conducted on vocabulary learning strategies, four important categories are highlighted which are metacognitive strategies, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. It is very important to understand these concepts as it forms the basis of the any study being conducted in this field.

Gu and Johnson (1996) list second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. The metacognitive strategies comprises of selective attention and self-initiation strategies. First language learners and Second language learners who employ selective attention strategies know which words are important for them to learn and are essential for adequate comprehension of a passage. Learners employing self-initiation strategies use a variety of means to make the meaning of vocabulary items clear.

Cognitive strategies in Gu and Johnson's taxonomy consists of guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies. It was found that learners using guessing strategies draw upon their background knowledge and use linguistic clues like grammatical structures of a sentence to guess the meaning of a word. Memory strategies are classified into two distinct categories; rehearsal and encoding categories. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding strategies encompass such strategies as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word structure which includes; analyzing a word in terms of prefixes, stems, and suffixes.

Finally, the activation strategies include those strategies through which the learners actually use new words in different contexts. For instance, learners may set sentences using the words they have just learned (Ghazal, 2007).

The definitions of the above concepts are simplified in the following illustration:
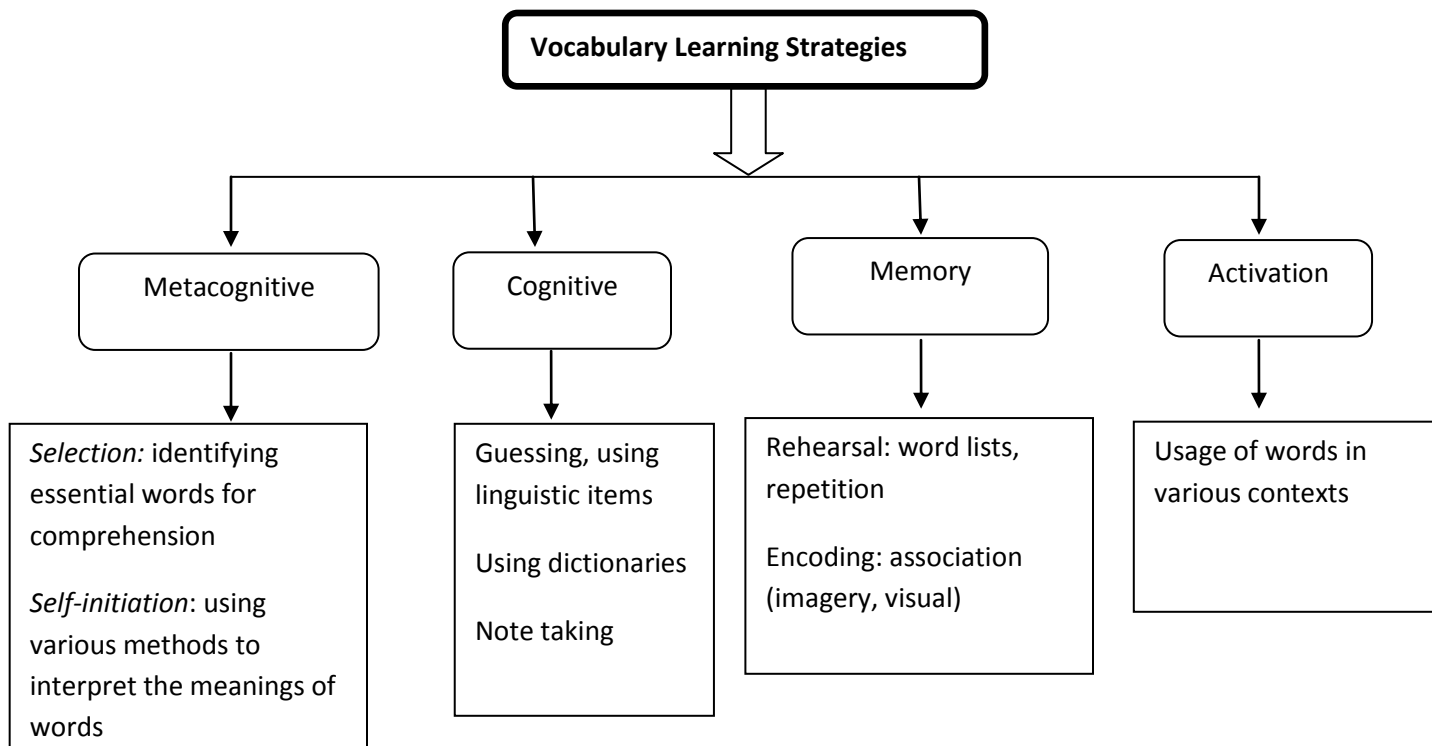
Apart from discovering new words, Ghazal (2007) states that learners need to employ a variety of strategies to practice and retain vocabulary. In order to accommodate this, learners thus, use a variety of social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies to consolidate their vocabulary knowledge.

2.5 Concept of Good and Poor Learners

Each learner employs different strategies to assist in learning new vocabulary. A learning strategy is a series of actions a learner takes to facilitate the completion of a learning task. The learner brings to the language learning situation a wide spectrum of individual differences that will influence the learning rate and the ultimate learning result. The most widely reported learner factors include age, sex, language aptitude, intelligence, prior knowledge, motivation, self-concept/image, personality, and cognitive and learning style (Peter, 2003). This brings forth the concept of good learners and poor learners; those learners who are highly motivated feel a genuine need to practice the vocabulary and use this strategy to maintain the vocabulary. Good learners not only use more strategies, but they also rely more heavily on different strategies than the ones poor learners use (Scafaru and Tofan, 2006). In a study carried out by Ahmed (1989) it was found that good learners were more aware of what they could learn about words, they paid more attention to collation and spelling and at the same time they were more conscious of contextual learning. Learners are able to comprehend more new vocabulary once they use a

number of strategies and do not simply stick to one which is the case for poor learners who concentrate on one method simply. On the contrary, the article by Scafaru and Tofan (2006) is very contradictory of this statement as it further mentions that statements like "the good learners practice" are not really helpful. What we need are more specific findings which tell us what the learner actually does when he practices". In fact, it is through practice that learners commit words to memory and thus use it as confirmed by Peter (2003). Some learners will repeat the new word a number of times until they are comfortable with it. Others will go beyond simple rote repetition to commit the word to memory (Peter, 2003). These types of strategies are part of practice which is used by the good learners.

Ahmed (1989), in a study involving 300 Sudanese learners of English found that good learners not only used more vocabulary learning strategies but also relied more on different strategies than did poorer learners.

2.6 Common Strategies Learners Apply

In the research conducted by Scafaru and Tofan (2006), there was use of over seven different strategies which included micro-strategies, macro-strategies, dictionary use, memorization, practice, preferred source of information and note taking. Note taking is a strategy which a lot of learners use and it has been proved to be effective as some learners prefer to work on visual memory, which means since they have written a new vocabulary they are able to create an image in their mind about the word. Both the papers (Scafaru and Tofan (2006) and Peter (2003)) confirm that there is a similar pattern in note taking. Learners took notes in the margin, used vocabulary books, organized words by meaning, spelling formation, word derivation, grammatical information, or vocabulary cards.

Research from the studies has also proven that dictionaries have a great impact in learning and one of the most common things that learners buy first is a dictionary. Like it or not, a dictionary is amongst the first things a foreign language student purchases (Baxter, 1980; Luppescu & Day, 1993), and learners carry their dictionaries around, not grammar books (Krashen, 1989). It has been argued whether a monolingual dictionary is better than a bilingual one. Further, research has shown how the dictionaries have been used by learners. Since a combination of good features of both types of dictionaries is not impossible, there has been considerable interest in the last twenty years in the "new bilingualised comprise dictionaries", hybrid dictionaries that essentially provide translations in addition to the good feature of monolingual dictionaries (Hartmann, 1991, p.79). Laufer and Hadar (1997), for example, compared monolingual, bilingual, and bilingualised dictionaries among 123 EFL learners in Israel. Through their study, it was found that, regardless of the learners' proficiency level, the bilingualised version was rather significantly better than, or as good as, the other two types in both comprehension and production tasks.

A research conducted by Akbary and Tahririan (2009) on Vocabulary Learning Strategies shows learner preferences of using bilingual dictionaries. They investigated vocabulary learning strategies used for specialized and non-specialized learning vocabulary among ESP students in

different field of studies (Kafipour, Yazdi, Soori & Shokrpour., 2011). The subjects in this research comprised of 103 undergraduate medical and paramedical students who had enrolled in ESP in Isfahan University of Medical Sciences from 8 different fields of study. The methods that were used in this study included observation, interview and questionnaire was used to elicit data. The findings of the questionnaire showed that the most frequent strategy was using bilingual dictionaries and the most commonly used learning strategy was oral and/written repetition (Kafipour, Yazdi, Soori & Shokrpour., 2011).

An important finding which was revealed in the paper by Peter (2003) was the use of repeating aloud strategy. Empirical results on this issue are also relatively unanimous, that repeating words aloud helps retention far better than silent repetition Peter (2003). A similar study was carried out by Seibert (1927) who found that if learners studied aloud, studied aloud with written and studied silently, the result showed that the first condition always produced better when compared with the other two. He then followed up further, if the relearning was effective even after 42 days and found that again learning aloud was significantly efficient than the other two conditions. However, guessing is also a strategy which is used by learners and studies have shown that if guessing is used as a strategy it can be beneficial.

Furthermore, the guessing strategy principally applies to reading text as confirmed in the study completed by Day, Komura and Hamamatsu (1991). The study was conducted in Japan with 181 high school and 397 university students whereby they had to read a short story for approximately 30 minutes and soon after reading the text they had to do a multiple choice test and it was found that both the high school and university groups performed well.

In a longitudinal experiment, Cohen and Aphid (1981) found that students simply tried to memorize words that they did not know. O'Malley et al. (1983) found that repetition was the most commonly mentioned strategy, with strategies involving deeper more involved manipulation of information (i.e. imagery, inferencing, Keyword Method) being much less frequent (Nielsen,2002); on the contrary, to Nation (2001) noticing involves seeing the word item to be learned. Strategies at this level include putting the word in a vocabulary notebook or list; putting the word onto a word card and orally and visually repeating the word. Nation points out that although these strategies are all of recording type; these are useful steps resulting in deeper processing of words.

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented the main findings of various areas of vocabulary learning strategy research. These findings reveal the importance of exposing learners to various methods. The concept on good learners is very clear that those learners who are able to employ various strategies are more successful in acquiring vocabulary than those who choose to use fewer strategies. Language teachers need to make learners conscious of the need to develop an independent and structured approach to language learning, which has been shown to be mostly associated with vocabulary learning success.

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