

The Effectiveness of Vocabulary Learning Strategies on English language Acquisition of the Saudi Learners

Dalal A. Bahanshal

King AbdulAziz University

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

It is widely believed that vocabulary knowledge is so closely tied to language mastery. This tends to be one of the greatest challenges language learners encounter during their long journey in language acquisition. The challenge is due to the great number of words that learners suppose to comprehend and master as to be able to understand, communicate and use the target language (English) effectively. One of the effective avenues that has been found to greatly impact vocabulary acquisition are vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Therefore, the aim of this qualitative study is to investigate the strategies prioritized by Saudi 2nd high school students when learning English vocabulary. It is proposed that VLS would aid Saudi learners, of all levels in general and high school level in particular, to acquire a vast number of vocabulary which consequently will motivate them to become avid, lifelong learners. The findings show that Saudi high school English learners employed some strategies, yet unconsciously, more than others. Guessing word's meaning from contexts, using dictionaries and memorizing new words seem to be the most preferable ones. Other strategies such as note taking and seeking help from others were less adopted.

Keywords: Vocabulary acquisition; vocabulary learning strategy (VLS); Saudi English learners.

1. Introduction:

Language words are the bridge humans cross to learn new ideas and meaningful concepts. In light of that, it is believed that vocabularies of any language, either native language, second or foreign, are crucial as they are tools speakers use to convey and express the world around them. Gutt (2000) mentions that the powerful form of communication is the linguistic one as humans are capable of conveying semantic symbols to verbal expression which involves the mental description of images, sounds and words and that make language and communication as two sides of the same coin. Thereby, some people look at languages as a matter of words as through words, new concepts are acquired and through the needs of expressing ideas and emotions words are created. Considering the importance of words to any language, Stubbs (1986) stated that "when people think of a language, they think almost invariably of words" (p. 99). In sum, we conclude that vocabulary has a large role to play in determining the success or failure of language learning.

In the field of foreign language learning, in this case English, there are many factors that have great effects on learners' achievement such as teachers' teaching styles or proficiency, students' learning styles, students' background, attitudes and motivation. One of the greatest challenge

that has been found to hinder the learning's achievement of English learners is the sheer number of vocabularies learners have to master in order to access the language content and show a clear understanding of its component. Many studies which are conducted on the domain of second and foreign language acquisition reveal that vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of language achievement (Richards, 1980; Allen, 1983; Laufer, 1986; Nation, 1990 & 2001). On a study conducted by Horwitz (1988) investigating learners' perceptions towards vocabulary learning, she found that 25% to 39% of her participants agreed or strongly agreed that achieving a foreign language depends mainly on learning its vocabulary.

Up until quite recently, language teachers used limited techniques to improve learners' vocabulary acquisition. Trusting vocabulary pivotal role, a demand has been raised for decision makers, course designers and teachers to pay great attention to vocabulary teaching by providing ample time to teach vocabulary explicitly. Thus, lacking particular vocabulary knowledge will negatively influence learners' production and comprehension of the target language (TL) and therefore learners will lose a tool of communication. (Coady & Huckling, 1997) contended that the size of vocabulary learners acquire is an indicator of general language ability which is crucial for all aspects related to language such as reading, writing, comprehension and communication. For that, choosing which vocabulary to be taught should be made in accordance with specific aims and tasks set forth by course designers and language experts considering words students need as to gradually reach the lesson objectives.

Coming to know that language learners will not be able to master all or most TL words, teaching learners various and effective strategies that facilitate vocabulary learning should be a high priority of all language teachers. However, due to the limited time and the huge number of words language learners must acquire, language teachers will be confronted with some problems in choosing the words their students need to learn. Therefore, focusing on training students on how to use useful strategies merits the time spent in such effective tasks.

2. Significance of the study

Realizing the significance of vocabulary in any language learning context, the present study attempts to identify VLS preferred and employed by Saudi high school students and discuss the impact of their preferences of their English vocabulary learning.

It is, therefore, anticipated that the data analysis will expose the least and the most frequently VLS implemented by the Saudi English learners. Considering the study findings, teachers can design lesson plans and construct practical strategies which prompt VLS as to motivate less able students and assist high proficient ones.

3. Definitions of Terms

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been recognized as very important processes when learning a second or a foreign language. Chamot & Kupper (1989) defined LLS as "techniques which students use to comprehend, store, and remember information and skills" (p. 9). O'Malley & Chamot (1990) asserted that LLS are mostly applied in vocabulary learning tasks. Therefore, research to date has shifted its interest to vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) rather than LLS bearing in mind that VLS are part of LLS (Nation, 2001). Recognizing the importance of VLS to language teaching and learning, many scholars have made great effort to define them and therefore many taxonomies have been presented (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997; Nation, 2001; & Gu, 2003). Cameron (2001) defines VLS as "actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary" (p. 92). Takac (2008) demonstrates VLS as "specific strategies utilized in the isolated task of learning vocabulary in the target language" (p. 52).

Nation (1990) proposed three helpful strategies which facilitate learners' vocabulary acquisition namely; guessing from context, using mnemonic techniques, and using word parts. On a wider classification, Oxford (1990) has developed another system which categorized VLS into four groups. First, Social Strategies (SOC) that rely on interacting with others for the purpose of improving TL. Second, Memory Strategies (MEM) that connect new materials to other knowledge that are already existed in the learner's mind. Third, Cognitive Strategies (COG) enable learners to engage more mechanical means such as repetition and content analysis rather than activating the mental process. Finally, Metacognitive Strategies (MET), (memory and cognitive), are advanced ones that involve learners consciously in the learning process which requires making decision, monitoring the learning progress and evaluation of the best way to master TL.

4. Literature Review

Long time ago, Scrivener (1994) has drawn attention to the fact that vocabulary is a powerful carrier of meaning. Considering such leading role, an interest on vocabulary acquisition has grown rapidly (Cameron, 2001; Farhady, 2006; Snow & Kim, 2007; Celik & Toptas, 2010; Wanpen et al., 2013). Many researchers believed that the heart of mastering any foreign language is through knowing most of its words as vocabulary is the key element for reading, writing, speaking or understanding. It is to say that the learning of any skill will suffer if learners do not acquire sufficient vocabulary items. Lending support to that, scholars like (Laufer, 1992b; Haynes & Baker, 1993; Hu & Nation, 2000) found that the most significant factor that obstructs proficient reading is neither the lack of adequate reading strategies nor of grammatical knowledge, but rather the lack of sufficient vocabulary. Cobb (1995) reported his experience with Omani students where he found that most college students are facing difficulties with reading English text. He stated that the major weakness on students' reading level was due to their limited vocabulary items. As a consequence of inadequate vocabulary items, students may encounter difficulties in clarifying their meanings, expressing themselves and verbalizing their thoughts (Al-Hazmi, 2007). Encountering such difficulties, many students will lose interest in the language and become less motivated, hence it is imperative to note that all learning activities are filtered through students' motivation.

From reading some of the related literature and getting to know how difficult it is for learners to acquire most of the language vocabularies, the researcher proposes that teachers ought to pay great attention to the basics of VLS and teach their students how to adopt and utilize some various strategies effectively not only to facilitate their vocabulary learning but to aid the mastery of all language skills as well. This in line with Takeuchi (2003) who asserted that the importance of VLS has given it a leading role along with other strategies in relation with language skills that learners need to acquire. Many studies have also shown that apart from curriculums, teachers' styles or teaching methodologies, learners' strategy is a crucial factor that affects TL vocabulary learning. Hence, learners should be well trained to acquire various VLS which will limit the learning burdens and frustration caused while vocabulary learning. Providing learners with effective vocabulary instructions will help them to become more autonomous and make their learning process less challenging (Biemiller, 2001; Marzano, 2004; Carlo, August, & Snow., 2005; Beck & McKeown, 2007).

What is it that makes successful vocabulary learning so deciding? In fact, it is the various VLS which are acquired by learners to enhance their vocabulary acquisition. However, far too little attention has been paid to VLS used by Saudi high school English learners. Investigating some of these strategies will be of great significance not to Saudi students only but to others who share similar language difficulties. One of the early qualitative studies that aimed to investigate VLS and their relationship with the variables of English learners is a study conducted by Wen and

Johnson (1997) where they found that metacognitive and psycholinguistic strategies are frequently employed by Chinese students majoring in English. Similarly, Gu & Johnson (1996) aimed to establish VLS used by Chinese university learners of English and the relationship between VLS and English learning outcome. The results showed that Chinese university learners use a variety of metacognitive vocabulary strategies.

In one of the early longitudinal experiment conducted by Cohen & Aphek (1980) result showed that memorizing the unknown words was one of the strategies applied by most of the students. However, their findings contrast with this study finding as most of the participants showed negative reaction towards memorization. One possible explanation for these contradictory reports is that Saudi English teachers are not paying much attention to memorization strategy as a helpful means to acquire English vocabulary. In the same vein, Kim (2006) conducted a study investigating the most used VLS by Korean college students. The result revealed that more practical strategies are often favored over more complex ones. The study participants confirmed that it is easier for them to guess the meaning when the unknown words occur in a rich context and that also helps them to retain the correctly-guessed words.

Investigating the Arab context, Medani (1989) set out to examine the use of VLS by some average and low Arab English learners. The findings of this early study showed that there was considerable strategy variation between good and low learners as the former implemented a wide variety of strategies, whereas the latter's tendency was to apply fewer or no strategies in most cases. In sum, the literature leaves us in no doubt that vocabulary has a prominent role in language achievement. Surely enough, it is toiling and challenging for English teachers to teach vocabularies in contexts such as the Saudi one where there is no authentic settings for students to practice TL outside the classroom. Therefore, careful planning from educators and teachers is required to provide powerful vocabulary instructions and effective VLS that lead learners to take control of their own learning and gradually gain achievement, proficiency and most importantly confidence.

5. Subjects and Setting

The 30 female participants who joined this study are Saudi 2nd high school students who have studied English for 6 years starting from grade 6 at the elementary stage. The study was undertaken in two public high schools in the southern and eastern regions of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Most of the students in these two regions come from families of average or low income. A big number of schools in these two regions as well as the others, northern and western, are provided with computer labs and built in data show in many classes. Teachers of all subjects, where English is no exception, are requested to implement technology in their teaching but many teachers prefer not to do that and that could be ascribed to their limited knowledge of technology. Regarding English, it is taught 4 days a week where each class lasts 45 minutes. Communicative teaching approach is not preferred by many teachers, however, teachers-students approach is still the dominant one. Each English lesson has a variety of different language skills; reading, listening, writing and speaking. Vocabularies are taught as part of the lesson with no concentration on different learning strategies.

6. Research Methodology

6.1. Data Collection

This study aims to investigate some of VLS employed by Saudi 2nd high school students while learning English vocabulary. The theme of the study revolved around two research questions:

- 1-What VLS do Saudi 2nd high school students employ to prompt their English vocabulary learning?
- 2- What factors are affecting the participants' choice of VLS?

Answering the study questions, the researcher believes that it is best to employ the qualitative approach due to its connection with language acquisition. Supporting that, Ellis (2003) stated that “language is grounded in human experience and in human embodiment” and human experience “represents the world in a very particular way” and that is qualitative analyses (p. 65). In this study, questionnaires and interviews were involved to identify and describe VLS which are used by the participants.

6.1.1 Questionnaires

As a first step, the study data was gathered through questionnaires as they are considered to be one of the easiest and convenient method to be employed in a study. It is also believed that questionnaires are effective for accessing the participants’ point of view (Brace, 2004). The questionnaire was designed in 2 parts where the first part requested some information about the participant such as name, age and contact details. Participants were told that the first part is an optional one but if they choose to respond, guarantees were granted to all that their information will be kept secret and will only be used for the purpose of this study. The second part of the questionnaire, had 15 questions rounded about strategies participants employ while learning English vocabulary. The first 13 questions which put down to investigate the frequent use of VLS where chosen according to the researcher's long experience in English teaching as well as to the remarks of some English teachers’ colleagues. All 30 2nd high school students were encouraged to choose one response that best describes their usage of VLS from the 5-point-scale; never, seldom, sometimes, often and always. Such formation makes it easy for the researcher to control and see the participants’ responses clearly and therefore draw the expected results. The last two questions were open-ended questions which give participants some space to shed the light on other strategies they have tried but not mentioned by the researcher and to express their views towards English learning in general and vocabulary learning in particular.

6.1.2 Interviews

The second form of data collection are the interviews which were conducted after the questionnaire analysis to gain more understanding and build on narratives that are grounded on the participants’ perceptions towards the study theme (Liu, 2004). Among the thirty participants, ten interviewees were chosen randomly. Interviewees’ questionnaires were studied carefully in order to set different questions for each according to their questionnaires’ responses. Even though the interview questions were different, they are still related to VLS. The interviews were recorded and later analyzed by comparing interviewees’ responses to each question and that helped to identify the similarities and differences among participants towards the use of VLS.

6.2 Data Analysis

As a basis of this study, Oxford (1990) VLS categorization were utilized and their frequent usage by the study’s participants was examined. Through analyzing the data, the findings proved that even though Saudi 2nd high school students were not fully aware of VLS and the best way to apply them, they employed cognitive and determination strategies more than social and metacognitive ones. The most and least used strategies used by the study participants will be explained in details.

7. Result and Discussion

7.1 Guessing Context and Clues Searching

A close examination of the data instruments; questionnaires and interviews, the results reveal that Saudi 2nd high school students use some of VLS unconsciously and neglect the others as not being aware of their existence. The most common strategies which were found to be employed by the study participants are determination and social. Guessing and searching for clues within the context, which are under determination category, were shown to be the most used strategies.

88% of the participants rely on the previous mentioned strategies while encountering difficult words or trying to answer exam question such as “*What does the underlined word refer to?*”. The results are consistent with the findings of Oxford & Scarcellat (1994) who found that the most useful strategy used by their participants was guessing from different given contexts.

Interestingly enough, while interviewing participants about the guessing strategy which they employed when coming across difficult words or unknown words in any English text, their answers were quite unexpected. They asserted that they have no knowledge what so ever that they are some effective strategies which provide great help to comprehend the meaning of TL words. Elaborating more, they said “*if we complain to our teacher about the difficulty of some words and ask her about their meanings, she may provide the Arabic translation or say “just read the sentence in which the difficult word is located and you may understand what it means”*. We have never been taught how to do this or if this is a strategy that lead to a successful word recognition”.

7.2. Dictionary Use

Another determination strategy which was found to be used by almost more than three-quarters of the participants was the use of dictionaries. 79% of the participants had clearly stated that “*it was only at the beginning of the academic year when our teachers requested to bring a bilingual dictionary to class yet we never used it*”. When asking our teachers about the meaning of any word, she would say “*you have your dictionary, so go home and check the word. There is no time to do this in the class because we have to finish the lesson*”. Getting such replies, students never brought their dictionaries with them but they got the point of relying on it when they really need to know the meaning of certain words. The findings of this study are in agreement with others as it is been reported by different research that despite the proficiency level of L2 learners, many of them rely on bilingual dictionaries to know words’ meaning (Kent, 2001 & Jian et al, 2009). Gu & Johnson (1996) found that guessing and dictionary strategies were the most preferred ones by Malay English learners whereas notetaking, rehearsal and encoding were less adopted.

7.3. Seeking Others’ Help

Another social strategy applied by the study participants is seeking others’ help which is believed to be an effective strategy for vocabulary learning. The findings showed that 72% benefit from this strategy where others were reluctant to use it due to culture and social influences. Discussing this issue with the participants who never asked for help, their reply came to no surprise. They confessed that “*we are fully aware that asking others, except your teacher, for help such as an excellent classmate is the easiest and the fastest way to know the meaning of not only one word but sentences, in some cases. But, doing that you will be mocked by other students especially the weak ones and you will be ranked as a fool or a lazy person relying on others to get high marks. Therefore, we prefer not knowing the word rather than being mocked by almost the whole class*”. We could say that somehow this result in line with Marchand & Skinner’s (2007) who found that the majority of highly motivated L2 learners are apt more to seek others’ help than the less motivated ones. Considering the realities, we could say that great responsibilities lie on the shoulders of English teachers as students should be taught different effective strategies directly which facilitate their learning and that will arise students awareness of VLS and then be able to apply them intentionally and consciously when needed.

7.4. Notetaking

Waring (2002) confirmed that using books to take notes of important vocabularies or other language skills is very beneficial to language learners. Unfortunately, most of this study participants did not show much interest in this cognitive strategy where only 41% used notes to record words’ synonym and antonym so as to be able to revise them before exams. However, fewer students, about 19%, used books’ margin to write the Arabic translation of some difficult words. Other studies shed some light on this one. Ahmed (1989) surveyed different types of

Sudanese learners and found that most of them prefer taking notes of the new items or writing notes for meanings or translations in books' margins. From what has been said, we could confirm that more often than not, teaching vocabulary items seems to be a source of frustration for students and teachers alike. One of the most helpful avenues to overcome this problem is to train students to incorporate various VLS while learning vocabulary and that will be through engaging students heavily in challenging activities that develop their skills and arouse their awareness of VLS.

7.5. Memorization

Another strategy which is one effective means of vocabulary learning is memorization of the new words. Even though, oral memorization or written one is believed to be an effective strategy language learners could adopt, Saudi high school students showed negativity towards this strategy. Only 35% confirmed the importance of memorization especially with new words while others clearly stated that they practiced memorizing the words only at the beginning of the semester but later when their teachers neglected dictation and spelling they did not bother wasting their time studying the new words. One of the students who felt reluctant to memorize new vocabulary expressed her resistance by saying *"I do not even know what are the best ways to memorize words. I tried many times but failed so I decided not to waste any time. I strongly agree that memorizing does not help because most of the memorized words seem to fly away"*. However, about 56% participants proved that they rely on memorization only before the exam day. This finding is in line with Connell's (2004) who stated that *"Memorizing word lists rarely works...what is important is that teachers have deliberate strategies for clarifying word meanings and that children have opportunities to use those words in context"* (p. 2).

Answering the open-ended question *"Is there any strategy that you use to learn new vocabularies which is not mentioned in the questionnaire?"*, two helpful strategies were mentioned by the participants which are listening to English songs and watching English movies. In regard to the first one, 71% of the participants declared that *"listening to songs expanded our English vocabulary and improved our pronunciation as well"*. The researcher was anxious to know if this strategy was employed by the participants intentionally or not. Carrying on the discussion, the participants proved that they never knew that listening to English songs is an effective strategy that will help them to develop their English vocabulary, however, they listened to songs for fun and enjoyment. They said *"loving the music and the song, we always repeat its words and sometime write each line till we are able to sing the whole song"*. Saying more, *"no matter how long is the song. If we like the song, we will keep on repeating its words no matter how much time it takes"*.

Questioning the rest of the participants about this strategy which their peers found very effective, they interestingly replied *"words of songs are not going to appear in the test paper why should we waste our time repeating words which we will not use and most importantly we do not like English music or songs"*. Summing up the above, it can be concluded that repetition as a means of effective strategy is favoured by many students even though they do not apply it within their learning context. Considering students' responses, teachers could benefit from the power of songs, rhythms or even plays by synthesizing some new vocabularies in short songs or poems and encouraging learners to repeat the lines till they master all the words then exciting challenges and competitions could be performed by all students.

Watching English movies as a means to learn English vocabularies seemed to be very effective to many participants. 63% of the participants mentioned that they started only watching movies because they liked the story and the actions with no intention whatsoever to learn vocabulary. Adding more, some stated that *"with time, we picked some words and sentences which we intentionally repeated in front of our classmates to show ourselves off. Witnessing the interests of others, motivated us to watch"*

TV frequently in an attempt to grasp more and more English sentences and phrases". As a reply to my last question "Did you know that this is a useful strategy to learn English vocabulary"? The participants' response came to no surprise as they confirmed that "at beginning we only watched for fun and wasting time. Later when we gain some sentences and noticed that our spoken English has improved, we deliberately free ourselves to watch at least one movie a day. But still we do not know how to employ this effective strategy in the learning of our English books".

Arguing the effectiveness of this strategy as a means to acquire English vocabularies, participants who showed no interest mentioned that after school, their time to study all subjects is limited and if they want to watch TV their parents will not allow them. A very interesting response was professed by one of the participants who said "even if I know that watching English movies will elevate my learning of English vocabulary, how I could convince my parents who believe in books and teachers as the only means of conveying and presenting information". Considering the realities, we suggest that special emphasis should be made from the teachers' side to raise students' awareness of more practical and applicable strategies that facilitate their learning processes.

8. Conclusion and Limitations

The aim of this study was to examine the strategies that Saudi 2nd high school students employ to facilitate their learning of the English vocabulary. Base on the discussions of the study data and the reviewed literature, it is evident that VLS are strong factors that affect language achievement. From the findings, we conclude that the vast majority of the participants successfully applied some VLS which prompt their vocabulary mastery. The discrepancy among participants in their use of VLS were very clear as some employed a variety of VLS, yet unconsciously, others were reluctant to use any as they believed that vocabulary learning will come with time. Therefore, it is the teachers' role to rise their students' awareness of VLS through challenging activities and intensive classroom practice which will provide opportunities for students to experiment the use of VLS in meaningful contexts. The primary suggestion of this study would be directed to syllabus designers and material developers to include explicit teaching of different VLS and train teachers of different language proficiency to design vocabulary lessons strategically and provide them with ample practice on how to apply VLS in their teaching and exercises.

One limitation of this study is that, it did not consider the participants' level of English proficiency and it seems to be more effective if two or three VLS have been taught to the participants and then the effectiveness of these VLS on their English proficiency could be tested. Most importantly, teachers' perceptions towards the explicit teaching of VLS has not been considered in this study. Therefore, the research topic still call for many further studies not only within the Saudi context but in others where English is taught and spoken as a foreign language.

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